

The Wedding Photo

Copyright 2009 Elizabeth Owen
All Rights Reserved

Marry Me

“I’m on furlough for two weeks and may not come back alive. And you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Let’s get married.”

Those were the very first words Charlie ever spoke to me, slurring a little beneath the dim lights of the USO dance floor. And then he leaned in and licked my neck like a frozen Popsicle. I slapped this forward, tipsy soldier who I hadn’t known for more ten minutes. I slapped him across his square jaw line so hard a little spittle flew out and into the face of a marine dancing right next to us. The marine, of course, mistook the spittle for an insult, and slugged Charlie in the face, knocking me onto the ground in the process.

Sprawled there with my garter belts showing was a completely out of body, out of character experience for me. I’m a buttoned up kind of girl, with carefully curled brunette hair, a strict bedtime schedule and short legs that walk so fast my roommate Betsy says I could generate all the electricity needed to power the lights on Times Square. I work at the glove counter at Woolworth’s, live in a walk-up over an air shaft, and the most adventurous thing I do on the weekends is sip Shirley Temples while Betsy flirts with soldiers. So as you can see, this particular night was not par for my course.

My brand new blue velvet hat shifted askew on top of my head as I rolled to the side, avoiding the scuffle taking place between my neck licking soldier and the spit-upon fist swinger.

“BETSY!” I shrieked as I tried to modestly get up, holding my skirt down and gripping a nearby sailor’s hand as I attempted to get up off the dance floor with some amount of decorum.

Charlie, in his liquored state, glanced down at me and my disheveled appearance and yelped at the fighting marine, “That’s my future wife you just knocked down!” And with that he socked the poor marine so hard the man spun completely around and crumpled onto the floor. Drunk or not, Charlie packed a punch.

“I love you!” he yelled at my retreating figure.

“BETSY!” I screamed louder, desperate to get away. Desperate to reclaim the dignity and prudence I’d worked my whole life to achieve. But mostly, I was afraid he might try that neck licking act again.

The sharp shriek of the MP's whistles cut across the dance floor, bringing the band's romantic rendition of Night & Day to a screeching halt.

"Good," I thought, "they'll arrest that crazy man." I turned to make sure, to smirk and feel that a bit of my honor was being reclaimed as they slapped a pair of handcuffs on him.

And they did, two MP's grabbed his arms. He dwarfed them standing at 6'5, dark hair, huge shoulders. And he never stopped calling after me.

"What's your name? I need to know so we can get married!"

Betsy appeared at my side and took my elbow, her bright blond hair glowing under the dance floor lights as she grinned, "Looks like you had some fun, 'bout time!"

"I may never forgive you for this," I gritted my teeth, shielding my face with my hand; suddenly aware that everyone was staring at him, and then back at me. Their heads whipped back and forth, back and forth between us, like a tennis match.

"Let's get out of here!" I gripped my purse and turned for the exit.

"What's your name? I love you!" he called after me.

Betsy pulled at my arm, "Hold up, he's fantastic looking!"

"Are you crazy? He's a lecherous drunk. I won't even tell you what he did to my neck! Never mind, you'd probably like it. Let's go!"

But Betsy, the girl from Brooklyn who had officially dated half of the US Navy to 'boost war time moral', turn-coat and traitor to our friendship, yelled back, "Her name is Ava Smith! She works at Woolworth's!"

"I hate you!" I yelled at her and began to run for the door.

"I'm Charlie Fitzgerald and I love you Ava Smith!" he called after me.

I could tell by the very tone of his voice he was grinning. Stupid soldier.

And we were married three days later.

Pursuit

“You realize that pervert is liable to show up where I WORK.”

I combed my dark curls with fury before applying some red lipstick. Saturdays called for a day off, lunch with my mother, followed by a quick return trip to take care of Betsy’s hangover.

Betsy was reclining in a beige nightie with an icepack on her head. Betsy doesn’t drink Shirley Temples like I do. She drinks enough Sloe Gin Fizz to work with the midget fire breathers at the Ringling Brother’s Circus.

“Oh who cares? And besides, he was so drunk he probably won’t even remember dancing with you. That man was blitzed.” She groaned a little and closed her eyes.

I pointed at her severely, “Glass houses.”

“Lighten up,” she slumped farther onto her narrow twin bed, “Just once you could pull that burr out from under you saddle and let loose a little.”

“And just once you might choose a quiet night at home as opposed to swinging from the chandelier. Goodness knows I’d like to skip dance night at the USO and get a good night’s sleep on the weekend, the only reason I go is to keep an eye on you,” I pursed my lips disapprovingly and examined the bruise I had acquired on my leg when I fell last night.

Stupid soldier.

“And to get your neck licked,” Betsy muttered with a smirk.

I stood up pertly and patted my hat squarely on my head, “I’ll be back in two hours. Get some sleep. When I get home I’ll fix you a sandwich.”

“I’ll never eat again,” she groaned again as our door buzzed loudly. “Tell whoever it is to stop that ringing!”

I marched through our tiny apartment and yanked open the door.

It was at this moment, the exact millisecond that I laid eyes on the giant man looming in the doorway that a shriek ripped past my lips. I slammed the door so hard paint flakes drifted down from the ceiling as my shaking hands grabbed for the chain lock.

“It’s him!” I hissed at Betsy, who was now slinking out of bed in as much alarm as someone with a hangover could muster, “How did he find me? Call the police!”

“No, wait,” his southern drawl muffled through the door, “just let me explain. Don’t call the police; the MP’s just released me this morning.”

I glared at Betsy and pointed at her, “This is all your FAULT!”

She raised two hands innocently.

I didn’t need this. I was valedictorian of my graduating high school class, savings account holder and a Sunday school teacher. I was not in any mood to deal a giant beast of a man who seemed to mistake women’s necks for dessert trays.

“Listen,” he was apparently smooshing his face into the crack of the doorway, “I’m Charlie Fitzgerald, remember? I’m here to beg your forgiveness and make amends for my boorish behavior last night.”

“Oooh,” Betsy clapped her hands and gave a little squeal; “He sounds like Rhett Butler!”

I crossed my arms, “You’ve never been outside New York! You think every man from the south sounds like Rhett Butler!”

I could hear his feet shuffling uncomfortably in the hallway, “Could you open the door?”

“Absolutely not,” I shook my head empathically, “I can hear you just fine this way.”

“I dropped by Woolworth’s first thing this morning after I was released. But they said you weren’t working today, and gave me your address here.”

“You went to my place of WORK?” I stomped my foot for Betsy’s benefit.

“I didn’t do anything to reflect badly on you, I promise.”

“Sheeze Ava, the guy sounds sincere. Open the door, give him a chance to apologize correctly,” Betsy’s smile looked like there was a canary hiding behind it.

I took a deep breath and opened the door cautiously, gazing up at him until my neck would lean back no further on its hinges. He slouched in the doorway with one arm, gazing down on me with a big smile and a twinkle in his violet blue eyes. Not the drunk twinkle I’d seen last night, but the kind of twinkle that means loud jokes, inappropriate burping, and piggy back rides for nieces and nephews. And Betsy was right, he was fantastic looking.

I sidestepped him on my way to the stairwell, “I appreciate this gesture. But it’s entirely unnecessary; you could have easily just written me a note. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve

got to meet my mother for lunch. Good day.”

“Great, I’ll go with you. I’m starving,” he strode easily beside me, matching five of my quick steps with one long one.

I opened my mouth to rebuff him, but he kept talking.

“I don’t usually drink that much. I’ve just been worried about where our unit is going, where we’ll end up, if I’ll make it home. And I’m not really sure what I did to your, um, neck. The details are a bit hazy, but I do apologize,” he drawled, his big hands shoved in his pockets.

I clip clopped down the stairs loudly, “It is most unnecessary for you to delve into the events of last night Mr. Fitzgerald. It’s probably best that you don’t remember it.”

He grinned, “I did remember how pretty you are.”

I placed a hand on my hip and turned to face him, “Mr. Fitzgerald...”

“Charlie,” he grinned down on me in total ease.

“Charlie,” I gazed at him in pure discomfort, “I do appreciate your apology, but you don’t really think this little performance is going to work, do you?”

He smiled, “What performance?”

I rolled my eyes and began walking brusquely down the sidewalk, “*The Sisters of Perpetual Sorrow’s House for Wayward Women* is chock-full of unfortunate girls who bought into that “I could die tomorrow” soldier routine.”

He grinned wider, “Does that line really work? I’ll have to remember that.”

I curled my lip in disdain, staring straight ahead as he loomed beside me.

He chuckled again, completely unruffled, “Listen, I can tell you’re a nice girl. If I were planning something dastardly and off-color, it certainly wouldn’t be with a girl who reminds me of a no-nonsense librarian.”

I gritted my teeth.

“A very pretty, no nonsense librarian of course.”

I said nothing. My face was turning an angry shade of white as all the blood rushed from my head in frustration. I wanted to brush him away like an annoying fly buzzing in my ear. A giant mule-sized fly.

“Anyway, I’ll come with you. I’d like to meet your mother.”

I turned and walked angrily down the subway stairs, “You have no idea what you’re saying. My mother will eat you alive.”

“Nah, mamas love me,” he drawled.

And for the first time that morning, I couldn’t help but smile, “Not my mother.”

Hurdling Mother

Once, when I was a little girl, Mother took me to the Bronx zoo. We were standing in an underground cave, a sheet of glass in front of us. Behind the glass was an aquarium with exotic fish, turtles and a small shark making laps back and forth. Above the aquarium was a beautiful jungle setting, where observers from the sidewalks above could see swinging monkeys and look down into the beautiful pool of fish.

I remember standing happily, underground, in front of this aquarium, mesmerized by the light of the water shining down on my face as fish flashed their green, orange, and blue fins. All at once a small, dark figure splashed into the pool, eye level with me.

I shrieked and jumped backwards into Mother. It was a small spider monkey. Mother explained later that he had fallen from the trees above, accidentally plunging into the deep pool. His fur flattened in the aqua blue and he looked tiny and pitiful, his little hands paddling, struggling to swim to the surface.

I remember shrieking, “SWIM MONKEY! SWIM AWAY FROM THE SHARK!”

And he did. He paddled and disappeared into the surface above, into the oxygen and away from danger.

And right now, at this exact moment, as Charlie is holding open the door to The Mermaid Café, I feel like that spider monkey. My ears feel like they’re filled with water. The sounds of the cooks frying bacon and The Andrews Sisters singing on a radio behind the counter are muffled, faraway. And I know that no matter how much I want to swim away from this, I have to stay. Unlike the spider monkey, I can’t flee the shark. I have to sit down at a table with her.

I have two choices.

One: I can introduce Charlie as my friend and pray that he won’t drink a lunch martini and try to lick Mother on the neck.

Or two: I can walk in and say, “Mother, this strange soldier followed me and I didn’t invite him.” But then she’ll pull the small hammer she carries in her purse for protection and hit him squarely in the head. Then again, if he tries to lick her neck, he’ll get hit with the hammer all the same.

I'm not afraid of very much in this life. I've had an emergency gallbladder surgery that left me with a scar bigger than some men's war wounds. I've been chased by a purse snatcher. When there are creaks in the night, I'm the one creeping along in my nightgown with a baseball bat while Betsy locks herself in the bathroom. But even now, as a 27 year old woman, I'm still mortally terrified of my mother.

Don't get me wrong. She loves me. I love her. But her personality is cut from some sort of indestructible steel wool cloth. She never hugs. She never coddles. She is efficient, small, angular and wired for battle.

I spotted Mother at a small table by the window, her starched white collar shirt buttoned all the way up, her graying hair swept into a neat bun, and a pair of blue earrings clipped on each ear. I didn't even have to be close to her to know she smelled of soap and lemon nail balm.

We walked over slowly, and before I could say anything, Charlie spoke up.

"It's really nice to meet you, Mrs. Smith," he stuck an arm past me in an attempt to shake her hand.

"Mother, um..." I tried to form a sentence but found that my Adam's apple had turned to a small cinder block.

"Move out the way Ava, let me have a look at your friend," Mother's bony little hands pushed me aside as she peered around me, glaring up at Charlie.

At 5'4, I tower over my tiny mother. Somehow, I always felt that should give me an advantage. But it doesn't. Apparently, Charlie's massive height doesn't give him one either.

"Charlie Fitzgerald ma'am," he continued to hold his hand out naively.

I glanced up at him quickly, my eyes bugging in Morse code, "Death and destruction await you, leave now."

She eyed his hand like a slab of beefsteak, critical and slightly suspicious, not touching it.

Charlie slipped his outstretched, un-shook hand into his pocket with ease, without a hint of discomfort on his face, "I can see that Ava's beauty is hereditary."

Still no word from Mother. Only the death glare I'd seen at certain important moments in life. When I lied to her about my math grade. When the mail man tripped and fell on her package of mail-order china. When my aunt used the common vernacular term for a female dog to describe Mother during one of their many fights.

They should have sent Mother to Europe long ago. She would have made eye contact with Hitler, glared, and he would have instantly curled up and died.

"Nice to meet you Charles," she squinted at him, "Won't you join us?"

"I'd love to," Charlie grinned and pulled Mother's chair out.

But I wasn't fooled for one second.

Little did Charlie know that Mother was inviting him to join us for lunch so she could place him beneath a magnifying glass like a science experiment. If he was lucky, she would just glare down on him with a giant eye and inspect him. If he was unlucky, she would tilt the magnifying glass ever so slightly beneath a ray of sun and fry him like a chicken leg in hot oil.

The waiter came and Mother placed a small pair of spectacles on the end of her nose, "We'll have three ham sandwiches, coffee, and key lime pie."

And so it begins. Mother's test. Ordering for the table. Hazing. Intimidation. Emasculating. These were the things I'd learned from Mother. She might bake a dry cake and burn muffins, but she could bring a man to tears in less than an hour.

"Mother, Charlie might have wanted to order for himself," I fought a small smile. After all, it wasn't as if I hadn't warned him.

"Nonsense," she snapped her glasses back into the case and returned her target-like stare to Charlie's face.

Charlie, however, seemed completely contented and leaned back comfortably in his small café chair, "Ham sandwiches are my favorite."

Mother's eyes narrowed into two small slits.

I held my breath.

"What are you intentions with my daughter?" Mother leaned forward, clasping her hands

seriously. This was another strategy I was familiar with. Firing the biggest gun first. Weeding out the weak.

“Well ma’am,” he leaned forward as well, impervious, the hint of a smile on his face, “I proposed to her last night.”

“What are you talking about?” I muttered, reaching out and pinching his arm through his thick green uniform.

“Ava... keep your hands to yourself,” Mother didn’t look at me as she met Charlie’s smile with a piercing gaze.

“That’s alright Mrs. Smith,” Charlie winked sideways at me, “Getting pinched by Ava is as good as getting kissed by any other girl.”

I leaned back, waiting for the white heat of Mother’s explosion to rock the entire café off its foundation.

But it didn’t happen.

The unthinkable happened.

Mother’s sharp, brittle glass-like face did something unthinkable. The side of her lips began to twitch.

I frowned and leaned closer, peering at her face. Her lips twitched again. It was the beginnings of a smile. The only other time I’d seen Mother come close to smiling was eight years ago when the neighbor’s dog (the small one that always urinated on our paper) got run over.

And at that exact moment, as mom’s brittle little lips tried to form an unnatural, slightly frightening smile, I remembered my one and only memory of my father.

Dad died when I was five. But the week before his death, our little family of three sat on a picnic blanket in Central Park as Mother complained about her sister.

“She’s just the most unsettling, infuriating, irrational woman I’ve ever known!”

Dad tossed a sandwich my way and winked at me. Nothing ever made him nervous.

“Can you believe her decision making process? Absurd!”

Dad tossed another sandwich at Mother, who caught it and glared at him.

“Doris...” his voice was kind but firm.

Mother took a big bite of her sandwich, still angry.

“We’re here to have fun with Ava. I love you. But if you don’t calm down and enjoy this beautiful day, I’m going to sit on you.”

I glanced nervously between the two of them.

Mother’s glare faded. Her youthful lips turned up into a beautiful smile, and she laughed at him. We had fun that day.

And now, as Mother’s pinched, road-worn face struggled to make its first legitimate smile in years, I realized Charlie wasn’t just any normal, troublesome soldier. He was a magician.

Approval

“How old are you Charles?” Mother’s smile faded back into oblivion, replaced with a look of pure business-like concentration.

“29.”

“You’re quite a bit older than most soldiers.”

“Yes ma’am, I enlisted after Pearl Harbor.”

“And despite your advanced age, you’ve never been married?”

“No ma’am.”

“And why not?”

I pulled at the buttoned collar around my neck, fanning myself with a menu. This conversation was an out of control express train, and I was riding on top of it with only my fingernails clutching at the metal roof.

“Seemed like a waste of time.”

Mother’s mouth twitched again, but quickly smoothed into seriousness, “And why, may I ask, is Ava not a waste of time?”

“I’ve got a gut feeling. Besides, she reminds me of my mother.”

My eyes bugged so large I could have been mistaken for Peter Lorre, “Do you have any idea how creepy that is?”

Mother rapped the table with her bony knuckles, “Ava be silent, I’m seeing to your future welfare. And for your information, that’s the highest compliment a man can pay a woman.”

I stifled a snort, slumping in my chair. Compliment my eye. Being compared to Betty Grable was something to get excited about. Being compared to some frumpy southern ‘mama’ was not. I glared at the side of his square jaw, trying my best not to notice the hint of a dimple appearing whenever he smiled.

Mother proceeded with her rapid fire questions, “How will you propose to support a wife?”

“My father and I run a farm in Alabama. We’re not rich, but we make a good living.”

“Excuse me,” I sat up straight and leaned on the table with both elbows, an extreme violation of Mother’s table manner rules, “isn’t it time you stopped this charade Mr. Fitzgerald? I think this has gone far enough.”

“Who said this was a charade? For your information, I have every intention of marrying you,” he stated plainly, calmly, the same way one might casually mention going on vacation.

Mother, who was examining us like a Rockefeller examines a contract, nodded brusquely, “Charles, listen carefully to what I’m about to say. There are three things in this world that make me angrier than a hornet trapped in a jar. One: my mailman. He mistakenly delivers Dolores Milazzo’s mail to my mailbox everyday. If he does it one more time I’m going to light him on fire with some Pine-Sol and a pack of matches.”

I leaned back in my chair, exhaling with relief. This was the dragon-like Mother I knew and loved. Charlie’s seemingly easy ride through lunch was about to come to a tear filled close.

She continued, “Two: my mother’s poodle Walter who repeatedly urinates on the Persian carpet that I’m supposed to inherit. And three: my late husband Arthur. He died and left me alone. And that still makes me angry,” Mother leaned forward, staring intently at Charlie, “Don’t get killed and leave my daughter alone.”

Charlie’s face momentarily hardened as he glanced out the window, “I’ll do my best.”

“Good,” Mother nodded briefly, “Then I give my approval.”

I blinked a few times, struggling to close my mouth. I am suddenly 10 years old again, at the table, being told how to hold a fork and use a napkin correctly. Except this involves my lifelong enslavement to a man I’ve known less than 24 hours. I peered closely into Mother’s face.

“Have you lost your mind?”

She dabbed her mouth with a napkin, “Certainly not. He seems like a reasonably good match for you.”

“Mother, listen to me carefully. I would rather jump in the Hudson in the middle of winter than marry this, this, idiot.”

Charlie nodded pleasantly at the waiter who brought our food and then winked at me, “I can’t be too much of an idiot, I did finish college.”

Mother cut her ham sandwich in half, “Don’t be overly dramatic, Ava. Charles seems like a very upstanding young man.”

I pursed my lips, trying to mimic the special breathing women use when in labor. But it didn’t work. I began to yell instead.

“HE LICKED MY NECK!”

The air grew still and silent. Bacon fried and sizzled on the grill as people stopped talking and turned to stare.

Mother glanced around the café and whispered in my direction, “Men do strange things when they’re in love. I’ll explain it to you later.”

I began to swallow furiously as a wave of nausea swept over me.

“So Charles, when will the wedding take place?”

Charlie shook his head, unfazed by the silence that hung around us as onlookers peered to see whose neck was getting licked by whom.

“She hasn’t said yes.”

I took a giant swig of milk, wishing for the first time in my life that I drank something stronger than Shirley Temples.

“Ava, it’s proper to respond to a proposal of marriage in a timely manner.”

I fanned myself furiously with a menu, stress hives inching their way up my neck and onto my face, “I have no intention of marrying anyone, let alone a perfect stranger.”

She glanced back and forth between us shrewdly and shrugged, “It’s time to be practical, Ava. You’re 27 years old with no prospects for a husband. I’m not sure how that happened, because you’ve always been pleasant to look at. Perhaps it’s your spiny disposition. Whatever the reason, we’re at war with half of the world and the shortage of men in this country is appalling. Now here you have one. Tall, handsome, gainfully employed. It’s time to quit playing at Woolworth’s and see to your adult responsibilities.”

I slumped in the booth, not sure whether to cry or wrap my hands around her little throat. “You think that supporting myself, working five days a week is *playing*?” I paused wracking my brain for an eloquent yet cutting insult, but all I could sputter was, “You’re small and mean and insane.”

Charlie glanced back and forth between us like an observer at a football game, his brow smooth and unwrinkled. My brow, on the other hand, looked like a pug dog.

Mother crossed her arms, "I did not raise you to speak to me this way. I want to see you married with children before I die. The ladies' Wednesday night bible class is already praying for you."

Charlie pretended to cough as he smothered a snicker into his hand.

I stood up swiftly, my chair rocking backwards, and marched toward the door.

"Come back here immediately," Mother's sharp voice cut across the restaurant.

I bumped past the coat rack and yanked open the door to the street.

"Ava, wait a sec," Charlie ran through the doors after me, grabbing my arm softly.

I shook myself loose, fighting a rabid urge to bite him, "What! What do you want? Would you like me to introduce you to my boss? Maybe you could get me fired today! Or I could introduce you to my grandmother and you could find a way to get me cut out of her will! How else would you like to plague my life?"

"Come on, I didn't intend to make you fight with your mama."

"And I suppose you never fight with your 'mama,'" I snapped.

Charlie shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged, his smile carrying no hint of teasing, "Mama died. But I do remember that she cut the crust off my sandwiches and made a special costume just for me every Halloween."

"Well now I just feel, bad..." I muttered ungraciously.

He patted my arm, "Don't. You do remind me of her. She was full of piss and vinegar too."

I wrinkled my nose.

"In the south that's really a good thing, to be compared to a man's mama."

I shook my head, "Well, not in the north. Don't say that to girls here, it just makes you seem really odd. Especially that whole thing about vinegar."

"It's going to hurt my conscience if you two have a falling out."

"I'm not going back in there," I crossed my arms stubbornly.

"You could call her," he suggested.

I curled my lip, "I suppose."

"Good. You can let me know how it goes when I pick you up tonight."

I charged down the sidewalk, all preconceived ideas of being polite to him leaping from my head, "I'm busy tonight."

He kept pace easily, "Let's say, 7:00. Do you like Italian food?"

"Of course I do, every girl likes Italian food. But that's not the point. I have plans," I turned quickly, crossing the street.

"Good, Italian it is then."

It was at that exact moment the left heel of my shoe snapped in half with the decisive ring of a gunshot. I fell. I went down like a sack of potatoes directly in the middle of the crosswalk. In front of cabs, in front of oncoming pedestrians, in front of a police officer. In front of Charlie.

Some women can still be beautiful and fall. I saw Myrna Loy do it in a movie. She tripped and fell in slow, graceful motion, dark hair beautifully in place, legs dainty. She exuded loveliness, helplessness, even as she plummeted toward the ground. Any man on earth would have been honored to have helped her to her feet.

I am not Myrna Loy.

I hit the ground with a thud and rolled sideways, grime and grit from the street embedding into my arm. Hair pins flew from my hair and the cab driver in front of us caught a two second glimpse of my underwear.

I tried to get up quickly, but managed to bumble around on the ground like a flopping manatee in the middle of 14th and Irving, until Charlie pulled me onto my feet. I kept trying to push my hat back on top of my head as he guided me across the street.

I huffily repositioned my skirt and blouse, loathed to look at Charlie's ever smiling face and the goofy grin that must be plastered across it. But as I glared upwards, I saw no such grin. No smile. No teasing expression of any kind. His concerned blue eyes looked almost purple as he brushed dirt off my shoulder.

I had to give him credit for his poker face, because if the tables were turned, I would most assuredly have laughed at Charlie had he sprawled in the middle of a crosswalk with flopping legs and flashing undergarments.

"You ok?"

Disarmed, my crusty shell wavered and I gave him a half smile, "Yes."

“Nothing broken?”

I flexed my ankle back and forth, “Uh-uh,”

“Can you get home on that broken shoe?”

“I think so.”

“Good,” he nodded genially, walking away, “Then I’ll see you at 7:00.”

Gnocchi, With a Side of Post Traumatic Stress

Charlie picked me up and we took a cab to La Mela, a tiny Italian restaurant tucked into the corner of an ancient brick building. He opened the stained glass door as we entered a room bathed in flickering yellow candlelight. The patrons sat in cozy booths and tables while speaking in soft, hushed whispers. The stucco walls were stained an aged tobacco brown and the wooden floor creaked beneath my heels.

Fantastic smells wafted past me; tomatoes, fresh basil, chicken. My stomach growled and I glanced quickly at Charlie, horrified that he might have heard.

If he heard, he never let on, “Table for two please.”

A waiter with black hair smiled at me, led us to a small table and then whispered as he walked away, “Bella, senora, bella.”

I frowned.

The restaurant couldn’t be any more romantic.

And I couldn’t be any crankier.

Charlie pulled my chair out and we busied ourselves inspecting the menus.

It became apparent after a few short moments our dinner was not to be an uninterrupted one.

A cook in a white apron marched by and kissed his fingers at me, “Bellissimo!”

I gave him my darkest scowl and gritted my teeth. I’ve never appreciated it when anyone, let alone men, make uninvited personal comments. Even if said comments are murmured in a romance language.

Charlie never looked up from the menu, a smile lurking in the dimple on his cheek.

I took a deep, annoyed breath and returned my concentration to the menu when another

waiter swished past with glittering brown eyes and stated in loud vibrato, “Bella senora!”

I slammed the menu down, “Is this not bothering you?”

Charlie reached out, pulled a piece of bread off the loaf in the center of the table, and eyed it calmly, “Nope.”

Another waiter waved at me from the back of the room, “Bella!”

“Well, this is ridiculous,” I huffed, “What’s wrong with these men?”

Charlie chewed a big piece of bread thoughtfully before swallowing, “Italians like pretty women.”

“And I suppose you’re not going to do anything about it?” I snapped.

“Nah,” he grinned, “They’re just paying you compliments. Something tells me all pretty women get special attention in here.”

“Listen carefully,” I pointed my fork, “None of this was my idea. Not the lunch with Mother. Not this dinner date. None of it. And I’ll be hanged if I sit here and get leered at by an entire wait staff.”

“They’re not leering, they’re calling you beautiful,” Charlie stated genially.

“Most men would be jealous,” I muttered.

“Sure,” Charlie broke off another piece of bread, handing it to me, “Most men would feel threatened and try to fight six waiters at one time. Most men are dumb.”

“But not you,” I snapped sarcastically, snatching the bread from his hand.

“Nope,” Charlie took another bite and smiled calmly, “When someone insults you, then I’ll do something about it.”

The ‘bella’s’ and ‘bellissimo’s’ dwindled as a tall blond woman sashayed through the front door and thankfully redirected the men’s attention. A waiter brought our food without looking at me, his head craned to watch the blond woman walk through the room.

I breathed a sigh of relief and tried not to wolf down the bowl of gnocchi with pesto in front of me.

“So how do you like being in the army?”

It was a half-hearted attempt at making conversation, but it was all I could muster.

Charlie shook his head, amused, “I’m not in the Army; I’m in the Air Corp.”

“So you fly planes?”

He grinned, “Something like that.”

“And you like it?”

“I wouldn’t say I like it,” his smile faded a little, “but I’m good at it.”

He began to talk freely about how his family emigrated from Ireland and settled in the south. He talked about his younger sisters, their grumpy father and his beloved hunting dogs, Butch and Ralph.

I smiled, trying to disguise the fact that I had no clue what hunting dogs were.

“So what about you? What’s your hobby?” he slurped some spaghetti sauce on his face.

Without thinking about it, I reached out with my napkin and efficiently dabbed his chin.

He stared at me intently.

“Well,” I started abruptly, embarrassed, “I like to make money.”

Charlie belly laughed loudly, unconcerned that he’d broached a decibel level unsuitable for the quiet restaurant, “That’s not a hobby!”

I looked at the tin ceiling above us, thinking.

“I like to take things apart.”

“What do you mean?” he leaned forward, interested.

I flushed, slightly embarrassed to reveal my most unfeminine trait, “Well, lots of things. I fixed our landlady’s washing machine last month and she took half off our rent.”

"I'm shocked," he grinned, but it was an appreciative grin.

Encouraged, I babbled on, "I helped our neighbor rework some old wiring in his kitchen."

"And how did you learn all this?"

A waiter could have dropped a tray full of dishes behind Charlie's head and he wouldn't have noticed.

I shrugged, "If I look at the parts long enough, it usually makes sense. I also have my dad's old plumbing and electrical manuals."

Charlie pushed his plate back, "I gotta tell you, you couldn't have shocked me more if you'd told me you were a trapeze girl in the circus."

I shifted sideways in my chair, simultaneously pleased with his approval and disgusted at myself for caring. A sudden noise across the room caught my attention and I glanced away from Charlie's smiling face just in time to see a man in the center of the room jump to his feet.

The man was a marine, tall and thin, with a shock of red hair. I knew immediately that something was wrong. I knew because of the look that passed over Charlie's face. His smile disappeared, instantly replaced with caution as he turned to watch the marine.

"Eat your food," the marine leaned over his seated date, growling.

His date drew back, afraid.

The entire room fell silent as all eyes turned to watch.

One of his friends at the table, a fellow marine, glanced around nervously, "Come on Kilpatrick, just sit down."

Kilpatrick's face turned a sickened white as he swayed a little, the pulse beating visibly in his neck. He turned from his cowering date and surveyed the room, "Go ahead, everybody EAT YOUR FOOD!"

Charlie scooted his chair back slightly, his knuckles white as he gripped the side of the table.

“Eat your food. Drink your wine,” his voice began to rise, “None of this is real. Want to know what’s real?”

I swallowed nervously, glancing at Charlie. He cut his eyes, giving me a quick, reassuring glance.

“Wanna know?” he backed away from the table, leaning over a nearby woman in a mink stole, “Bloody snow banks!”

The woman flinched and looked away from him.

Kilpatrick moved closer to us, pointing at a man in a pin striped suit, “Wanna know what else is real? Trenches and men with frozen stumps for feet!” He reached out and knocked the man’s plate of food onto the floor.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a waiter at the back of the room pick up the telephone, cupping his hand as he whispered into the receiver.

“Come on Kilpatrick,” the other marine stood up slowly, carefully, “Let’s go outside and get some fresh air.”

Kilpatrick began to laugh manically, “Remember Kirby? Huh?”

“Just calm down,” the marine bargained.

“Kirby was my cousin,” he whirled and looked toward me, his eyes dead and unblinking, “But none of you care.”

Charlie muttered, “Don’t make any sudden moves.”

“Kirby got his forehead blown off while we were smoking cigarettes!” he was moving closer now, shrieking at me, “That’s what’s real! So go ahead and eat your food, you stupid dame!”

In a flash, before I knew what was happening, Charlie was out of his seat.

I sat frozen as Charlie tackled Kilpatrick. My head began to spin, trying to decide what to do. I pondered jumping on Kilpatrick’s back and poking him in the eye with my fork, because at that moment, helping Charlie was the only thought pounding in my brain.

But it became quickly evident that Charlie did not need any help, let alone mine.

He grabbed Kilpatrick by his arm and whirled him around, grabbing his other wrist and holding both arms behind his back. The other marine dashed forward as they forced Kilpatrick down on the ground.

“Get off me,” he screamed, his face pressed against the wooden floor plank, “Get off me you Nazis!”

A waiter shouted from the back, “The police... they’re coming.”

Kilpatrick screamed and wailed like a cat, but the horror in his voice and the anger in his grimace never made it into his eyes. His eyes were pale blue marbles, blank slates, no expression, no life left. I'd heard about the thousand yard stare, and apparently, this was it.

The front door burst open as four policemen raced through the crowd and relieved Charlie and the marine. But Kilpatrick was finished with his struggle. He quietly stood up and let the police handcuff him.

Charlie strode across the room and held out his hand.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” he tossed some money on the table.

I looked up at him blankly, stunned.

“Ava,” he leaned down and spoke gently, “give me your hand.”

I cleared my throat, picked up my clutch and took his hand. There was a buzz around the room as other couples took our cue, standing and exiting the restaurant as the police led Kilpatrick outside.

Charlie patted my hand, “I told you when someone insulted you I’d do something about it.”

I stared at him, undecided whether I should slap his face or hug his massive shoulders.

“You like ice cream?” he asked.

I drew a ragged breath, “What?”

“There’s a little ice cream place over by Central Park. What do you say let’s go?”

I eyed him for a moment, pondering his instant metamorphosis from battle hardened soldier to cheerful ice-cream fetching date, “Ok, why not.”

“And I promise,” He held up a hand solemnly, “we won’t ride in any of those cheesy horse and buggy get-ups. I get the feeling you wouldn’t like that.”

I smiled genuinely for the first time all night, taking his arm, “Well in that case...”

The Kiss

Charlie bought our ice cream and we strolled in silence through Central Park. Horse carriages clip clopped past us, taxis honked in the distance, and we walked in easy silence under the black starless sky. He ushered me towards a bench tucked between a pair of trees as I tried my best to keep strawberry ice cream from running down my arm. I was deeply engrossed in the task when something made me pause and glance at Charlie.

Charlie smiled, his eyes mischievous as he tossed his half eaten ice cream into the darkness.

I frowned disapprovingly at the waste of a perfectly good pistachio cone when it dawned on me what he was doing. Charlie was trying to kiss me.

He leaned closer to my face; his serious expression making me want to burst into a thousand idiotic giggles. I could punch myself. There is absolutely no reason I should be acting this way. After all, I've smooched my fair share of men.

First there was Wilson Parker, a shoe salesman at Woolworths. He was tall, gangly, and kissed me three times before Mother made him cry over a dinner of pot-roast and mashed potatoes. Afterwards I dated Robert Matthews, a nice, boring man who worked in the subways.

But most recently there was Burt. He always had sweaty palms. Burt also patted my hand gently one night and said, "Ava, I can't believe someone as pretty as you is an old maid. I don't know how you've escaped for so long, but let's get married."

And that was the end of Burt.

Old Maid. According to my mother, once an unmarried girl is my age, the best she can hope for is a steady job and a good pension. And now, as I inch my way into my 30's, people equate me with one of those aged WWI ships in the harbor. They're rusted, creaky, unfit for current battle duty and just float until someone decides to dismantle their parts.

I don't feel old. I don't feel like I'm missing anything. I like my job, I like making money, and most importantly, I like not answering to someone else. The reasons for

getting married (a nice apartment with custom made drapes, a pudgy baby with dimples on his knees) rarely cross my mind.

But regardless of all the men I've kissed, all the men I've run away from, right now, at this very moment, my stomach feels like a metal fishing boat with hundreds of crabs crawling around in the bottom of it. In a good way, of course.

Charlie leaned even closer as I nervously cleared my throat, "It's awfully warm this spring."

"Hmmm." He wasn't listening to me at all.

I repositioned the purse in my lap and began to fumble around for a nail file, "I get the worst hang nails."

He paused, his face inches from my cheek, "Will you hold still? You make me feel like I'm trying to skin a live deer."

I pursed my lips, staring straight ahead. On one hand, the mental image of a dead deer was less than romantic. On the other hand, Charlie's slow, even breathing was creating a flush of goose bumps on my arms.

His lips brushed my ear. I couldn't decide whether to swoon or knock him out.

I shook my head, gathering my faculties, and turned to glare at him, "You're kidding right?"

"I never kid about important things," his lips brushed my neck.

"So help me," my voice sounded unconvincingly shaky as I tapped the nail file ominously in my hand. "I'm going to ram this file into your eye if you don't stop right this very second."

He paused right below my ear, grinning, "Let's have two kids. We can name them Nail and File. They've got a good ring to them, don't you think?"

I tried to straighten my spine and crossed my arms, "I'm not joking."

He brushed my ear with his lips again and I nearly fell over sideways.

"Umggmmgghhh."

I had no idea what sound I'd just made, some sort of addled combination of Um, Huh, and Grrr. I gripped the file so hard it almost cut into my palm.

Charlie chuckled and eyed my nail file, putting his arm around my shoulders, "Fine. I'll stop. I'm not a fan of getting stabbed."

I glanced sideways, heat rising on my neck as I gazed into his violet eyes. I had no intentions of letting this soldier make me swoon, even if I did want to wrestle him to the ground and kiss the lips right off his face.

He leaned back farther, assessing me with a frank expression, "I've been thinking."

"I bet you have," I fanned myself with my hand.

He pulled me closer, "Let's really get married."

I rolled my eyes.

"We can go to city hall. Just you and me."

"Get real."

"I mean it," he placed one hand on the back of my neck and before I could utilize my nail file, Charlie kissed me squarely on the lips.

I had every intention of not liking it. I'd planned to sock him in the jaw. And if worse came to worse, I'd planned on calling him a name that would no doubt insult his deceased mother, God rest her soul. But none of these things happened. In fact, the nail file slipped past my fingers and fell into the darkness.

Instead of charging into combat, I closed my eyes, wrapped my arms around his giant shoulders and hung on for dear life.

The Wedding Photo

I had no idea how much time passed. I lost count of the kisses and forgot to breathe. I pulled away from Charlie and took a deep breath of air at the exact moment an older man walked past, a small fox terrier straining on the end of his leash, growling in our direction. The elderly man clucked his tongue and shook his head disapprovingly as he and the cranky dog walked away.

I unwound my arms from Charlie's neck and re-pinned a section of curls that had fallen into my face.

All this kissing finally made it official. I'd gone off the reservation.

Charlie stared at me silently, "So how about it?"

I drew a deep breath and turned to face him squarely, "Why do you want to marry me?"

Charlie's mood shifted. His violet eyes darkened. The smile left his face, the left dimple on his cheek vanished. A cloudy darkness washing over his jovial, pleasant face and I knew, instantaneously, this was no time for jokes.

Charlie looked away, the muscles in his jaw line flexing and unflexing in silence, his big shoulders hunched as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and staring into the trees beyond. After a few moments, he began to talk.

"We were on one of the Solomon Islands and heard the marines had cleared out some caves where the Japs had been hiding. A pal of mine, Larry, wanted a Japanese flag. He thought he might find one left behind in the caves. I tagged along.

When I say the marines 'cleared out' the caves, what I mean is they went looking for hiding Japanese soldiers, and then blasted the caves with flame throwers. One of the marines was even nicknamed Zippo; he seemed to like doing it so much. Most times the caves were empty, but every now and then they'd find someone hiding and blast the cave with flames. Then he'd come running out, on fire."

Charlie stopped himself, choosing not to give any further details.

I was shocked. Not about the combat or horrible things he'd obviously seen, but mostly because I didn't know he was capable of talking so much.

After a few moments, he went on.

“So we went up to the caves. Larry was cursing about how the fire had burned up any flag that might have been there, and that’s when I saw something lying on the ground. It was a picture. I picked it up, dusted the soot off. Larry got mad that a photo had made it through the fire blast but he couldn’t find a flag.”

Charlie reached into his front pocket and pulled out a dirty, folded photo, handing it to me slowly. I opened it, smoothing it straight. A tall Japanese man with serious eyes stared back at me; a woman was seated next to him. They were dressed in traditional robes, crisp and folded, fans in their hands. The woman’s robe had a floral pattern with big, beautiful white cranes on it.

“This is a wedding photo.”

He nodded, “I figured. I looked at it and realized that man was probably dead. No man would leave behind a picture of his wife, lying dirty on the floor of some cave like that, unless he was dead. And while I was feeling sorry for him, I realized something. I realized that Japanese man would probably feel sorry for me. Because even though I’m alive, I’ve spent almost 30 years never knowing what that feels like. I’ve never loved a woman.”

He grew silent again, and for the first time in my life, I had no words. I couldn’t help myself as I reached through the darkness and squeezed his hand. He returned the squeeze and went on.

“Some people think this war is like play acting. Lots of men in uniforms, Bing Crosby songs, women wiping their eyes as they wave goodbye to trains and ships full of men. But it’s not play acting. My best friend died on the very first landing strip we saw, the second day we were in the Pacific. I heard the bullet whistle and then he slumped sideways. Just like that.

And I was thinking about him last night at the USO. Him and all the other men who’ve died, even that Japanese man. I had decided that for one night, I wasn’t going to think about this war anymore. So I started drinking. And that’s when we met. After I sobered up, all I could think about was your face.”

I took a deep breath and uncurled my fingers from his. I gazed back down at the wedding picture in my hands, “You can’t ask me to marry you because of this photo. I’m sorry you’re scared, and I know you’ve seen horrible things. But we can’t get married because of a sad story and a picture of two people we don’t know.”

Charlie gazed at me with a half smile, “I know that. But that photo made me realize how short this life may be for me. That photo made me stand up and take notice when you jerked your apartment door open and glared at me with your hands on your hips. I

realized that I want you to care whether or not I come back from this thing alive. That's why I want to marry you."

I stared back at the photo and swallowed. Actually, it was more of a gulp.

How could I accept a marriage proposal from someone scared he might die? It's the woman equivalent of taking advantage of a man. But on the other hand, I was certain of one thing. I was certain that Charlie Fitzgerald, a man who had carried a dirt stained wedding photo of a Japanese couple in his pocket for the duration of the war, was a good man.

I stood up abruptly, handing the picture back without looking at him.

He gave me a half smile, nodding his head dejectedly, "So this is it? Well, I knew it was a long shot. But thanks for letting me hang around, Ava. You've been a real sport."

"For goodness sakes," I rolled my eyes, gathering my clutch and hat efficiently, "Stand up Charlie."

"Huh?" he peered at me uncertainly, hunched somewhere between sitting and standing.

"Come on," I clamped my hat on my head, "take me somewhere with coffee."

"Ok," he wiped his forehead, thoroughly confused, "are you feeling ok?"

"I'm feeling fine," I reached down and took his hand as complete shock registered across his face, "but if we're going to get married, we've got some planning to do."

I began to march forward, but Charlie stood stock still, pulling me backwards.

"Ava, are you kidding?" he gripped my shoulders excitedly.

"I never kid about important things. Now how about that coffee?" I grinned, despite the fact that my stomach was doing flip flops.

"Coffee can wait," Charlie whispered, pulling me to him.

The elderly man lapped past us again, his dog barking spastically. Somewhere far away in the distance, he made more disapproving clucking sounds, but frankly, I couldn't hear past the roar in my own ears.

And while the rational part of my brain begged me to be sensible and not accept a marriage proposal from a handsome soldier I didn't really know, the irrational part of my brain, the part that usually lies dormant and quiet, screamed at me.

It screamed, “Don’t let him get away! You’ll be 80 years old on a porch swing one day, thinking of Charlie, wondering what happened to him.”

But now I won’t have to wonder. Now I’ll know.