

Pilots of the Purple Twilight

a short story by Kit Reed

The wives spent every day by the pool at the Miramar, not far from the base, waiting for word about their men. The rents were cheap and nobody bothered them, which meant that no one came to patch the rotting stucco or kill centipedes for them or pull out the weeds growing up through the cracks in the cement. They were surrounded by lush undergrowth and bright flowers nobody knew the names for, and although they talked about going into town to shop or taking off for home, wherever that was, they needed to be together by the pool because this was where the men had left them and they seemed to need to keep claustrophobia as one of the conditions of their waiting.

On good days they revolved slowly in the sunlight, redolent of suntan oil and thorough in the exposure of all their surfaces because they wanted the tans to be *right* for the homecoming, but they also knew they had plenty of time. If it rained they would huddle under the fading canopy and play bridge and canasta and gin, keeping scored into the hundreds of thousands even though they were sick of cards. They did their nails and eyebrows and read Perry Mason paperbacks until they were bored to extinction, bitching and waiting for the mail. Everybody took jealous note of the letters received, which never matched the number of letters sent because mail was never forwarded after a man was reported missing. The women wrote anyway, and every day at ten they swarmed down the rutted drive to fall on the mailman like black widow spiders, ravenous. Most of the letters were for the wretches whose husbands had already come *home*, for God's sake, whisking them away to endlessly messy kitchens and perpetual heaps of laundry in dream houses mortgaged on the GI Bill. Embarrassed by joy, they had left the Miramar without a backward glance, and for the same reason they always wrote at least once, stuffing their letters with vapid-looking snapshots of first babies, posting them from suburbs on the other side of the world.

At suppertime they all went into the rambling stucco building, wrenching open the rusting casements because it seemed important to keep sight of the road. Just before the shadows merged to make darkness they would drift outside again, listening, because planes still flew out from the nearby base every morning and, waiting, they were fixed on the idea of counting them back in. Most of their men had left in ships or on foot but still they waited. To the women at the Miramar every dawn patrol hinted at a twilight return, and the distant Fokkers or P-38s or F-87s seemed appropriate emblems for their own hopes, the suspense a fitting shape to place on the tautening stomachs, the straining ears, the dread of the telegram.

They all knew what they would do when the men came back even though they had written their love scenes privately. There would be the reunion in the crowded station, the embrace that would shut out everybody else. She would be standing at the sink when he came up from behind and put his arms around her waist, or she would be

darning or mending, not thinking about him just for once, when a deep

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