

Heat

by Dale Bailey

All summer Usher's Well burned with the war fever, an almost visible heat that hung in a dry haze over the high ridges and permeated the pores and hearts of the town's every inhabitant. You could not escape the war that summer. It issued in blistering radio tirades--Normandy and Saipan--from the airless High Street parlors of the town's gentry, and enveloped in sweltering debate the veterans of the last war as they hunkered over beer in the dim recesses of the VFW.

Mrs. Millhauser, who didn't drink beer, could think of nothing but the war. It awaited her in her living room, where Frank lingered by the radio in stony silence. It confronted her at Young's Grocery, where she fumbled in her ration booklets to purchase coffee, sugar, flour. Most of all, it turned its hateful face to her in the post office, where she waited for Tom's letters to fill an aching void like the place where a tooth has been. His letters were fragmentary and stoically homesick, scissored to lacunae of dread by military censors. As Mrs. Millhauser walked home, clutching the mutilated blue pages to her breast, the war seemed to emanate in waves from the sidewalks and streets. She could feel it, a damp trickle of perspiration between her shoulder blades.

It was hot like that all summer. Grass withered. Birds fell into parched silence. Passing cars stirred clouds of dust that took hours to settle. Mrs. Millhauser couldn't sleep, and when she did sleep she drifted into languid dreams of Tom as a boy, appearing out of the shadows every evening as he walked home from the Five and Dime, where he tended counter after school. In the dreams she stepped out on the porch to greet him, but something always held her back, an invisible wall of heat.

Afternoons, Frank walked downtown for the late papers. Mrs. Millhauser waited on the porch with a glass of ice tea.

"Hot," she said, holding the glass to her forehead when he returned.

Frank nodded, shaking loose a fresh cigarette. Heat flickered in Mrs. Millhauser's breast: even that had changed, the trademark green carton bleached white. Lucky Strike had gone to war.

Frank exhaled a gray plume. The lines around his mouth deepened as he started up the steps, and something flinched inside of Mrs. Millhauser as well; it hurt her, the way the leg hurt him, and the way he endured it, silently, day after day. It was the way he endured everything, in silence: the leg, the war, Tom's absence. Something in Mrs. Millhauser cried out for voice.

"Frank," she said. "Do you ever think of--"

But she could not say it, the boy's name--

--*Tom*--

Saying it might invoke the doom she dreaded.

"Think of what, Lil?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

He grunted. "Reckon I'll have a look at the papers."

The screen door closed behind him.

The heat broke the next day. Mrs. Millhauser woke up chilled and reached out to turn off the fan on the bureau. For a moment, she thought she must have touched the wrong switch. The sound of the fan went on and on, an electric hiss louder than the sound of Frank breathing beside her or the rumble of a car down the street. And then she realized that it wasn't the fan she was hearing, after all, but the sizzle of rain on the slate roof. She watched the rain come down, a gray drizzle that had a look of permanence to it; she luxuriated in the smell of it through the open window--a damp, earthy, *living* smell, like the smell of root cellars or fresh compost.

The rain wore itself out that afternoon, but the day remained cool. Mrs. Millhauser stepped outside for a breath of air before dinner. Across the street, the Widow Baumgarten scrubbed mercilessly at her windows; as the sun slipped under the far horizon, fireflies began to light their candles. Children gave shrieking pursuit. From far down the shadowy street footsteps drew near.

Mrs. Millhauser felt time slip around her, years fall away. For a moment she almost believed that she had dreamed it all--the war, the endless burning summer, the air-raid sirens as they wailed out like bereft parents, plunging the town into darkness. She stepped out onto the sidewalk and peered down the street, her heart seizing up as a familiar shape gathered substance from the shadows under an old oak.

"Tommy?" she whispered.

He moved closer, into the bright spectral pool beneath a streetlight, not the boy she had half-expected, home from the Five and Dime, but a man in an olive drab uniform, smiling a sad half-uncertain smile.

Mrs. Millhauser shrieked. "Frank!" she called in a kind of panic. "He's home! Tom's come home!"

Mrs. Millhauser moved to embrace him, but he stepped away, a strange expression on his face. And so she only looked at him, the tall, lean boy who had sprouted somehow--overnight--from the child she had nursed at her breast. Now, the boy too had disappeared. Oh, he looked the same. He had the same long bony face and the same crooked nose, the lean body he had gotten from his father. But a certain hard-won wisdom peered out from his gray eyes. As a child, he had put her in mind of the sweet, laughing boy she had married; now, he reminded her of the grim and limping stranger who had come back to her from Europe all those years ago.

"Tommy, you're all grown up," she whispered.

Just then the screen door opened and Frank stepped onto the porch.

"What are you hollerin about, Lil?" he asked. Then he caught sight of the boy. "I'll be damned," he said.

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"Mark my words," Frank was saying, "Hitler's whipped. The real problem is Stalin. You wait and see."

After dinner, they sat invisible from the street beneath the cool overhang of the front porch. The men sipped Pabst Blue Ribbon from bottles so cold that tiny diamonds of ice clung to the long necks. Mrs. Millhauser sat in the swing, studying the boy's shadowy profile.

“Hell of a thing,” Frank said, “the way McNair died. What did the boys think about that?”

“Not much. We didn’t think much about that.” It was the kind of answer he had given over the meal.

“Important man like that, I’d think the troops’d be all worked up. Lieutenant General, wasn’t he?”

“Lots of men die, Dad. Every day they die.”

Frank grunted. After a time, he said, “You want to walk down the VFW? Bill and them, they’d love to talk to you, you know.”

Tom shrugged.

Frank lifted a Lucky Strike to his mouth. “What do you think, then? The VFW?”

“Later, maybe.”

“Well,” Frank said, “it’s late anyway.” The bobbing ember of his cigarette flared and died away; shadows welled up and retreated in the hollows under his eyes. It gave Mrs. Millhauser chills to see them together, father and son, like one of those odd time-lapse snippets of film, a vision of the future, her child as he would look when he grew old.

Shuddering, she glanced away. Across the street, Mrs. Baumgarten bustled about with a watercan in the near dark. She had lost her husband in the first war, her son in the Pacific; now she lived alone and her house had the stark glossy sheen of a museum. Everything--her furniture, the company dishes in her corner cabinet, her hardwood floors--glowed. Even her flowers had survived the long summer; she had nursed them right through, long after Mrs. Millhauser’s had succumbed to neglect and worry and thirst.

To heat.

“Why don’t you say hi to the widow, Tom?” she said. “She asks about you. Every day she asks about you.”

“Later, Ma.”

“Well, she’s right there. It’s not so much to ask, is it?”

Frank stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray. “Your mother wrote you about Mrs. Baumgarten’s boy, Joe, didn’t she? There on the beach at Guadalcanal?”

“I know.”

“Why don’t you say hi to her, Tom?”

“No! Not now! I don’t want to go to the VFW and I don’t want to talk her!” And softer: “Not tonight, you hear?” Tom stood, leaving his beer by his chair. He stood between them, his head lowered. “I’m sorry,” he said after a moment. “I’m tired. I’m just very tired.” He sighed, hesitated as though he wanted to say something else, and turned away. The screen banged closed behind him. Mrs. Millhauser listened to his feet on the stairs.

A sliver of moon hung over the town. Mrs. Baumgarten had gone inside. They sat there for a while, the street quiet, the windows in nearby houses dimly aglimmer, the town so peaceful you could forget almost that there was a war somewhere, half a world away. Except

Mrs. Millhauser could never forget.

Sighing, she stood and collected the two bottles of beer, her husband's empty and the one Tom had left beside his chair, full and warm.

"Tommy didn't drink his beer," she said.

She sensed Frank shifting in the darkness, listening.

"He barely ate a bite at dinner. He just played with his food, and pork tenderloin always was his favorite."

The night flared red. Mrs. Millhauser stumbled back a step. Frank cradled a match at his face. Mrs. Millhauser stood there clutching the beer bottles and thinking of Tom, how odd he had been, and distant.

"Frank, something's not right about Tom. Something's not right."

"He's changed," Frank said.

She didn't like to think of that.

"Why's he home, Frank? No one else is home. Why Tom?"

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A gust shook the oak tree outside his window and the room swarmed with shadow from the light by the sidewalk. Mrs. Millhauser stood watching him at the chest of drawers, his breath suspended, so still that his uniform melted into emerald shadow, like he was only halfway there.

"Mother."

"I didn't want to bother you."

He turned. He had been looking at the trophies atop the chest, aglimmer with stolen light.

"You were always such a fine athlete."

He retreated to the window as she crossed the room. She lifted a trophy, all chrome and gold. Its coolness seemed to flow through her fingers, to take root and spread above her, like the canopy of some sheltering tree.

"Your father, he keeps them dusted for you, Tommy. You made him so proud."

"He never said so."

"It's hard for your father to say things. The time he spent in Europe, he never was the same after that."

Tom shifted suddenly like he wanted to say something.

Mrs. Millhauser waited.

She said, "He feels things, though. You've made him proud, being such a fine athlete, and volunteering to serve your country. You've made us both so proud."

Tom gazed out the window. He lifted his fingers to the glass. "I used to love this room."

"All we wanted was for you to be happy."

"Saturday mornings, I used to wake up real early with the sun shining through the leaves. It looked like coins, Ma, scattered all over the bed. I liked to lie there without getting up because the way the sun fell right on that chest where I had my trophies, shining like they were gold." He laughed softly. "Just looking at them, I knew everything was going to work out for me the way I had always planned it."

She placed the trophy carefully atop the chest.

"Everything is going to work out. Now you're home--"

"I won't be home long, Ma."

"Your furlough won't last forever. But your father says we'll be in Berlin by spring. You'll be home for good this time next year."

Tom had opened the window. A breeze kissed her face and hands.

"Tommy--"

"Mrs. Baumgarten, how's she doing, Ma?"

Mrs. Millhauser paused, abruptly breathless.

"Ma?"

"She took Joe's loss awful hard. He was everything in the world to her, all she had left."

"What's she do there all by herself?"

"Cleans mostly. She asks about you, Tom."

Silence.

"Tom," she said. "What's wrong with you, son? You didn't eat."

"Just wasn't hungry, I suppose."

"But your clothes. You didn't bring a suitcase or any clothes." She could feel panic rising in her, a parching premonitory wind. She fluttered her hands as if she could beat it back somehow.

"Just a short visit, Ma. I can't stay."

"Tom, Tom--"

"Ma, how come you never had any other children?"

"We just didn't, somehow," she said, and it was all she could do to force the words up the arid tunnel of her throat. "We just didn't," she said.

She said, "You're all we ever wanted."

“It’s so nice to have him home, isn’t it?” Mrs. Millhauser said.

They lay without touching as they had lain so many nights, Frank on his back and she here beside him, studying his profile in silhouette against the gray squares of the window on the street. Once, long ago, she had let her hand slip through his chest hair to the puckered scar where a bullet had gone in, just under the nipple. Frank had flinched away from her, gasping, and after that they lay side by side and did not touch.

“It’s like old times when he was a boy,” Mrs. Millhauser said, “sleeping down the hall like this.”

Frank made a sound deep in his throat.

The air was cool, and smelled of distant rain. Frank liked to sleep with the window open, the sheer curtains billowing over the bed like ghosts. Mrs. Millhauser had put on a fall gown.

“I had the strangest feeling when I was in his bedroom,” she said. “I kept thinking of a night years ago, he must have been ten years old. He couldn’t have been older than that.”

She turned to stare at the ceiling.

“I couldn’t sleep that night. But I thought I heard something, and I didn’t want to wake you, you were so tired. So I just tip-toed to the window. Tommy’s window was open and I thought he must have gotten hot and opened the window. And then I saw something in the oak tree and that’s when I realized: the little rascal had taken it into his head to sneak out the window.”

She laughed softly.

“Frank, I wish you could have seen him. I watched him climb all the way down that tree, and he didn’t have the faintest idea I was there. I was going to wait until he got down and surprise him. I was going to ask him just what he thought he was doing. But then he got down and stood under the streetlight, looking back at the house, and--”

She paused, burdened with memory.

“There was something about his face, like he wanted to stay but he had to go, he just *had* to, something was calling to him. I don’t know how to describe it. But I didn’t have the heart to call him back. I couldn’t somehow. And right then I knew what the hardest thing about being a parent would be: watching your children slip away, knowing they would and knowing there was nothing you could do to stop it.”

Mrs. Millhauser lay still, thinking of the morning that had followed--how she had clutched Tom so fiercely that she could feel the intricate bones in his back, fragile as the bones of a bird; how she had pressed her face to his tousled hair and drawn in the scent of moonlit streets and wind.

“Now why would I think something like that?” she said. Her own voice shocked her into silence. It had a shrill note that seemed to set every molecule of air atremble. It scared her so that she didn’t dare speak for a long time; she just lay there, listening to the sounds of the town, the creek whispering to itself and the plaintive song of the crickets and a train whistle testing the black air somewhere far away, the whole night quiring and the enormous weight of the sky bearing down and down until finally she could not endure it a moment longer, she had to speak, the words not so much produced of her own volition, as dragged from her to shatter the urgent chorus of the night.

“Frank,” she said. “Frank--”

But there was only silence, the two of them staring blindly into dark.

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Mrs. Millhauser murmured in her sleep, dreaming of Tom.

The night was cool.

Outside a steady rain poured down.

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She woke to the corpse light that precedes dawn, knowing she would not sleep again. Her stomach knotted, her breath caught in her throat. She had felt this way on her wedding day, waking to air thick with impending change, a surrender and a sundering, a joining together.

Mrs. Millhauser stood quietly, belting her robe. In the queer light, Frank looked old, his skin gray. An impulse from some half-forgotten past rose up to claim her, and she hesitated, a hand outstretched to caress his face, softened by years and sleep--

She turned away.

Downstairs, she set coffee to brewing, and then she turned, brushing back the curtains over the front windows. At first she hardly recognized him out there, his uniform deliquescing in the green dark under the roofed-in porch, a shadow among shadows.

She eased the screen door closed and stood on the porch.

“Tom?”

“Morning, Ma.”

“You’re up early.”

They sat on the steps in the close air.

The words surprised her, she said them so calmly. “I know, Tommy, I *know*. You come home without a change of clothes, you don’t eat, you don’t drink--and you think I don’t know?”

“Don’t, Ma. Please don’t.”

“Don’t? *Don’t?* What am I supposed to do? Act like nothing happened? Just go on? Clean twenty-four hours a day like that poor old woman across the street?”

He said nothing.

“Answer me, Tom! Answer me that, else why did you come here?”

Again, he said nothing. The silence stretched out like a sheet of unbroken glass, and then, in a small voice, she said, “How, Tom? How did it happen?”

“I got separated,” he said. “I got separated from my platoon, Ma, and I was lost and confused. I was frightened, Ma. I was so scared. It was late and dark and there were stars, I’d never seen so many stars, and I came to a stream at the edge of a field. There were woods

on the other side. I thought if I could just get a drink of fresh water I would feel better, I would go on into the woods and hide till dawn and I could find my way. I put down my rifle and got down on my knees to cup my hands in the water. He must have come down from the woods on the other side. I heard him, and I turned my head. I could tell from the look on his face that he was lost, too, that he was afraid. I never even reached for my rifle, Ma. I couldn't. I just stood up and he--he--"

"Okay," she said. "Okay."

She reached out and drew him close, and this time he allowed her to touch him. A terrible cold like no cold she had ever felt enclosed her, and yet she did not flinch from him. He did not return her embrace. He simply endured it for a moment, and then he would endure it no longer, and she released him.

"Okay, baby," she said. "Okay."

And then: "Why, Tom? Why did you come home?"

He didn't answer; he simply stared off into that strange blue light that separates the night and the day, his gaze fixed on a single light burning high up in the Widow's house.

He said, "She doesn't sleep, does she?"

"I look out sometimes before I close the curtains at night," Mrs. Millhauser said, "and that light, it's always on. Every morning, it's always burning. Nights must be hard for her. Days she keeps busy, but nights . . ."

She sighed and turned away, toward the ridges in the east, and the sky smudged pink from the rising sun.

Tom stood.

"I have to go, Ma," he said, and as if he had called it somehow, a long black Packard turned the corner and started slowly up the street toward them, its engine utterly silent. Tom stepped to the sidewalk to meet it.

"Stay, Tom. Do you have to go?"

The black car slid noiselessly to the curb. Staring at it, Mrs. Millhauser had a sense that it had come from nowhere, and that when it turned the far corner it would go back to the same place. It was glossy and long and so black that she could stare into it forever and never touch bottom. She looked up at Tom and then to the front seat of the car, where the driver waited, a black shadow beyond the mirrored glass, and for a single terrifying moment she felt certain he would turn his face to hers.

But he did not.

Tom opened the door.

"Why, Tom?"

"You needed me. You called to me."

"Tom, Tom--"

"You don't have to be alone," he said. He got in and closed the door. The car eased away from the curb and went down the long street and turned the corner and was gone.

Mrs. Millhauser watched it disappear and then she turned her gaze to the flat steely sky, the sun edging over the far ridges. A trickle of perspiration slid down her spine and Mrs. Millhauser bent forward to cradle her face in her hands.

The day promised heat.

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How long she sat like that she did not know, but the puddled rain had begun to steam away when finally she stood. In the kitchen, the aroma of the coffee greeted her, and she reached out with fingers tremulous and grown suddenly old to lift a mug from its peg. She poured the coffee and sat at the kitchen table and wondered how she would get through this day and the one to follow, and what she would feel when the telegram came to her door at last.

And what kind of way was that to say good-bye? she thought. *You don't have to be alone?*

Mrs. Millhauser folded her arms and rested her head on them, the room airless, the town sleeping, only she and the Widow Baumgarten awake in their empty kitchens, the silence so encompassing that she could hear the *plink* of each water droplet from the leaky faucet Frank somehow never got around to fixing.

But he would. She would ask him again, and he would.

He would.

The thought lingered in her mind a moment. Then Mrs. Millhauser stood, pushing the coffee aside. She went up the stairs and passed the empty bedroom with the trophies on the dresser, shining like gold. She went into the bedroom where Frank lay very still in the shadows, the sheer curtains hanging straight in the windless morning. Her nightgown clung to her when she shucked off her robe, the room was so hot. Before she crawled into bed, she reached out and turned on the fan.

She lay there for a long moment, feeling the cool air drying the perspiration on her body, thinking of Frank. At last, hesitant, her hand sought his across the sheets, and found it. His fingers closed over hers, stronger than she had imagined for all these years.

"I'm here," he said. "I'm right here, Lil."

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