

SARA'S SECRET

ANITA STUBBS

She sat straight up in bed, jolted from sleep. The roar had jerked her upright just as the impact shook the foundation of her small wooden house, rattling the windows. Her eyes darted instantly toward the baby's crib. He slept, undisturbed. She clutched her knees to her breasts, watching irrationally, as the interior of her bedroom danced with the yellowish-orange light of a raging fire.

"My God," she gasped, thinking the house was burning. She left her bed, moving quickly to the window. With trembling hands, she separated the lace curtains. Scarcely breathing she stood there, watching the inferno.

The aircraft had crashed less than fifty yards from her window, its nose crunched into the ground by the plunge, its tail suspended in the air. Blistering, ravenous flames engulfed the little plane, devouring the dry winter pasture grass around the wreckage as she watched. Comprehension finally penetrated her addled brain. She held her breath, hesitant to move.

A shadowy figure emerged, seemingly from the very midst of the fire. Her mind swirled in a storm of indecision. What to do, what not to do? Alone with an infant, in the middle of the night two miles from the nearest neighbor, her first instinct was to check the bolts on both the doors.

Merely a dark spot of motion at first, the image did not take the form of a man until he had put a short distance between himself and the wreckage. She saw him look toward the house, his arms protecting his face. She watched him bend to gather his parachute. Hugging the billowy mass, he came nearer. She watched him climb over the barbed wire separating the smoldering field from the yard. He was scarcely ten feet from her window.

Then, thunder rumbled, in waves, reaching a crescendo just above the roof. Abruptly, the night shimmered eerily as lightning ripped across the sky, electrifying the interior of the Texas farmhouse in a surge of power that lifted the hair from her skin. Before the downpour pounding the metal roof fully entered her consciousness, she thought the electrical display had been the plane, exploding in one final eruption. The rain hammered the tin above her head, drenching the fire outside her window, as he pounded on her door. She felt trapped in vulnerability. She cursed silently the foreign, yet utterly intrusive, war that had stolen her husband.

She struck a match, intending to light the coal oil lamp on the dresser, but the snap of igniting sulfur caused the baby to squirm, breaking his peaceful sleep. She blew out the match shaking her head in wonder that neither the crash of the plane, nor the violent assault of weather, had roused him. She moved toward his crib and patted his bottom rhythmically, returning him to slumber while the knocking persisted.

She reached for her robe, putting it on as she moved through the intimate darkness of her home. The wooden floor creaked beneath her bare feet. Between flashes of lightning, she crept toward the front door. Before she opened it, she struck another match. Her hand shook as she held the flame to the wick of the lamp.

The room glowed amber, the light spilling over the place like liquid copper, illuminating her slim figure, rusting her blonde hair, and bronzing her pale skin. Her heart matched the cadence of his pounding fist. She jerked the door open, just as his clenched hand was poised to rap the wood again. She stood there, her eyes wide, frightfully searching his face for she knew not what. Certainly not familiarity. She had known he would be a stranger.

Their eyes fastened as though riveted for an instant, weighing something, balancing the inevitable. She did not step back immediately to allow him entrance. She stood rigid, as though guarding her post. But his eyes, dark from the night and the ferocity of his ordeal, reached out to her across the threshold. She moved backward as he struggled to free himself of the parachute, letting it drop to the porch. When he entered the small room, he had to adjust his height in order to pass beneath the doorjamb. His presence seemed to shrink the small space until she hardly had room to move away from him.

Red clay streaked his trousers at the knees. His hair fell in black ringlets across his forehead, and water dripped from his lashes, his nose. A puddle formed around his mud-caked boots and bits of grass floated on the linoleum. "Don't be scared," he said, finally. He spoke in a whisper, obviously aware of her fear, of the shock she must be feeling, not wishing to alarm her more than he already had.

When she said nothing, he continued, "I'm Lieutenant—"

"No, don't tell me your name," she said.

Surprised at the authority in her voice, she was even more puzzled by the words she had spoken. Oddly, her fear had dissipated, and another emotion was taking its place. She did not want to know whose son he was, whose husband, whose sweetheart. She did not want to give his civilian identity a place in her house.

"Come into the kitchen. You can wash up and get out of that wet uniform," she said, her heart strangely calm in the midst of the violent storm.

"Let me take off these boots," he said respectfully, almost shyly, "I'm tracking up your floor."

"I'll heat some water and get you something dry to change into," she whispered, not wishing to wake the baby. She lit the oven, opening its door, allowing the warmth to blanket the chill in the tiny kitchen. She moved a chair close to the heat. "Your clothes should dry here before morning."

She made coffee. Then she poured water from a bucket into the white enamel-coated wash pan that sat beside it on the oil-clothed washstand next to the back door. He stood in the middle of the room, rubbing his left arm, massaging his elbow, stretching his fingers, testing for injury. His wedding band caught her attention, the gold reflecting the glow of the lamp on the table, as their silhouettes hovered about the walls and ceiling like chaperones. "Are you hurt?" she asked.

"I don't think so." His voice, self-conscious and polite, contrasted the torrential, rushing

sound of rainwater cascading against the windows, the unchecked onslaught overhead. "I nearly waited too long to jump."

She avoided his eyes as she took the chocolate cake she had baked that afternoon from the cabinet and placed it on the counter. She shivered considering the dual proximity of the mishap, the plane's point of impact so dangerously close to her house, the pilot's descent virtually into the flames.

"If you're hungry," she said, "help yourself." Then, their eyes, unable to resist the magnetism, met in joint understanding, equally reflecting the unexpected emotions, the blameless need, before dutifully disengaging.

He sat at her table, drank easily from the cup before him, taking the dessert offered him, while she busied herself with his bath water. She brought her husband's clothing, an undershirt and shorts, his old flannel bathrobe and corduroy slippers.

"Here," she said, placing the things in a pile on the table. "I'll make your bed on the couch. It's not long 'til morning." He said nothing, but she had known he would not.

She did not tell him her name was Sara, or that her baby slept in the other room. Or that her husband was on an island in the Pacific, doing battle. Fighting for freedom. That he had not been home in over a year, not counting the two days at the hospital when their son was born. That she was nearly exhausted with dread that he might never come home again, miserable with loneliness, too young to sleep every night alone.

Later, after the lieutenant had thanked her for her hospitality, after she had returned to her empty bed and while he lay warmly beneath the covering of her grandmother's bluebonnet quilt on her couch, she tried to sleep. But the darkness was too thick, the house too full of him.

She had seen his yearning, the tenderness in his eyes when he watched her in the kitchen. She tried to justify the two of them separated only by vacillation. She knew he had felt her desire to touch his shoulder as she poured the coffee, that he had sensed the unnaturalness prohibiting her from standing behind his chair while he ate. That the mutual desire between them only increased with the restraint that had forbidden her body from leaning into his back, her hands from massaging the tenseness in his muscles and the soreness in his neck, her fingers from caressing his hair. She was grateful for the care he took not to touch her, not to allow the distance between them to be swallowed up, even accidentally. Especially accidentally.

As she lay there in the dark bedroom, the shadows no longer dancing on the walls, his energy charged her body and, even as the palpating current arced between them, intensifying, weakening, she knew he would never come to her. She eased from her bed, unable to resist the magnetism of his nearness, the strength of their isolation.

Moving from her darkness into his, within the confines of the moment, she extended her hand to brush him softly. His fingers met hers feverishly, for he had reached for her even before she had touched him. The house readily accepted the muffled sounds of their breathing, of the rustling of clothing being shed, as naturally as the crocuses outside the window in their flowerbeds, having slept through the winter, welcomed the steady dripping from the eaves of the roof.

When they came together, her body enveloped his, engulfing him, giving and taking. He called her Kathleen. "Kathleen, Kathleen," he said, over and over. "David, oh, David," she whispered, as her husband's name escaped her lips in the throes of her own pleasure.

Later, the morning sun exposed the wreckage in the field. The lieutenant, having walked away from her house at dawn, returned with Old Man Atkins, her nearest neighbor, to survey the pile of charred, crumpled metal. She watched unnoticed from the bedroom window. The men rubbed the soot away from the bold insignia of the United States Air Force, and she heard the pilot mention his base in San Antonio.

She observed the young man, not more than twenty years old, pointing toward the barn, lying to the old man about where he had spent the night. "Thought nobody was home," he said, "since the crash didn't seem to attract any attention." As the lieutenant brushed at the imaginary hay clinging to his uniform, he avoided the old man's curious gaze. A profound tenderness quickened Sara's heart.

She moved away from the window, her son on her hip, his chubby fingers poking her eyes, pulling her nose playfully. She kissed his neck soundly. She knew Old Man Atkins would be checking on her before he drove the grounded pilot into town.

In the living room, she collected her husband's neatly folded clothing from the couch, and returned her grandmother's quilt to the closet shelf. She buried her face in the old bathrobe, and its familiar, yet somewhat different, scent almost overpowered her. Her cheeks blushed the deep rose shade of the wine-colored fabric, and she sighed deeply.

In the kitchen, she washed the few dirty dishes, made a pot of coffee, and turned on the radio. She bathed her son, put him down for his morning nap, and then made her bed. The intense tone of the broadcaster's voice detailing the casualties of the world's war unsettled her, so she turned it off. She did not want to hear about the bloody global conflict, about young men dying.

She quickly brushed her hair, and put on a clean dress. Soon the pilot and Mr. Atkins would come, first explaining, then asking neighborly questions. By the time the knock came, Sara knew what to say.