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Skeletons

by Miriam Silver

Joyce was feeling liberated and guilty at the same time. She was going to miss him, after all, they had been married for nearly 30 years, five of those suspended when she had thought he was dead.

He had been conscripted early in the war by which time they had only been married for a few months living in a rented flat, both working, he as a builder she as a waitress. They earned enough to provide a simple life, socialising one night a week in the local pub, maybe pictures another, family weekend visits. Simple, secure and unexciting.

On reflection she thought Joe welcomed his conscription call as a release from his dead end job which left her keeping things going believing it wouldn't be long before he was home again, not going out, felt odd without her other half.

It all changed when she went to work for the war effort in the local factory making ammunition where she quickly made new friends who were onto a good time at the end of their shift.

As a married woman, Joyce felt she could not join in and went home every day to an empty flat hoping there would be a letter from Joe. This went on for six months and eventually she agreed to go out with the girls after their continuous encouragement.

“Come on, no harm in joining us, we're only going to the village hall. There's a welcome dance for the Yanks, you must have heard...” Connie said.

She had heard about the American soldiers who had been billeted in her village, they were the talk of all the girls at work. Their gifts of nylons, oranges and even bananas for their hostesses, they were so generous and enjoyed company, especially of the local talent. Eventually, she did join in, she was glad after so long to be dressing up a bit, socialising wasn't doing anyone any harm, didn't want to get like her Mum, stuck in a rut.

As she danced and laughed her life burst into glorious technicolour, she couldn't remember when she'd been so relaxed, nice to be in company, enjoying simple flattery.

"Gee, thanks for dancing with me, long time since we left, you English are much more friendly than we were led to believe," Barney said demonstrating his dancing skills as he enjoyed the music.

After that night, their relationship escalated, he too had left a girl friend back in the states and was lonely, unlike her husband, he enjoyed so much, introduced her to the new stuff, Coke at the same time bringing welcome gifts of unobtainable luxury goods.

His American accent together with large gins and tonics reduced her to total infatuation as she convinced herself that Joe was dead and when the war ended Barney would whisk her off to the exotic America she knew so well from her weekly pictures outings. All would be wonderful out there.

He came from Detroit where he'd had a boring job too insisting Joyce would make his life perfect as she did in this god-forsaken frozen north. Conveniently forgetting he'd left behind a girl who was waiting for him to return to her and the baby. He was one to live for the moment and forgot to mention these salient facts.

Barney's outfit disappeared overnight. Joyce later learned he'd gone on the D Day landings. The war was going to be over soon, if Joe returned he'd never understand, couldn't expect him to really. Facing up to the situation she could only wait, wait and see and prepare to welcome her husband home.

The baby, a boy, would be 25 now. She'd never told Joe, they'd not had children. Now she could stop living a lie and look for the son she'd denied all these years, accepting every heart had its own skeletons.