



## Day Is Done

by Katelynn Siverling

### *Fiction*

I stood before my grandmother's gilded mirror she had brought with her as a young woman when her family came over from Ireland. It was dark mahogany with beautiful scroll and flower work in gold accents in the frame. The mirror showed its age, but I had nothing but fond memories of watching her stand before it, adjusting her dress or broach. Now I saw only myself, with her startling blue eyes and strand of pearls casting a stark contrast to the black velvet of my dress. The dress was new, purchased by Mother when Father passed away in the spring, after scrutinizing my wardrobe for appropriate funeral attire.

It was the second funeral of the year for our small town, and the first war casualty. Since the US joined the war, we were all bracing for the changes that would come to our lives, and I always knew this was a possibility—it was a risk all men took when they signed up—but I wasn't expecting it to be his.

My letter to Johnny still sat on my bedside table, unsent. It held my decision he never heard. At least he died with his heart still intact.

Mother called to me from the living room, the car was here to take us to the cemetery. I took a deep breath, gripped the black satin gloves in my hand, and checked my appearance once more. My skin was pale, already losing the color of summer, and my eyes were puffy, made raw by the nights spent lying in bed, staring at my unsent letter, wanting nothing more than my love's arms wrapped around me once more.

The symbol of his love still wrapped the ring finger of my left hand. There it sparkled in his grandmother's shadow. It was a classic from right before the turn of the century—a circular diamond, surrounded by smaller rubies. His grandfather had saved his wages for months and had help from his own father to provide his love with the ring he thought she deserved.

Johnny, too, had sought to provide me with everything he thought I deserved.

That's what he had been overseas, protecting men he had only just begun to know, tending to their fevers, bruises, and blistered feet. He fought for our country and sent a letter when he got the chance, but what was that worth? What was the occasional piece of him worth when I was home, trying to fill the gap in my life he had once filled, and planning a wedding that never came to pass?

There I stood, not even a widow because we didn't have the guts to go through with it before he left. Just the "lifelong friend" or "girlfriend" or—if I was lucky—"fiancée." In the time since Johnny shipped off, I quickly discovered something about the societal life that I once blended so well in: people don't like messy.

There was nothing orderly about my relationship with Johnny. We were messy from the start. From the lack of clarity in our friendship during our time in school, to the night we became engaged, even to the eve of our almost wedding when we made love because both of us knew there wouldn't be a chance for a honeymoon since he was set to leave the morning after our wedding.

We made love when the love should have already been there—a love that we never fully got to share because he felt the need to play nurse to a bunch of riffraff who saw the only way out of their current lives was to go and die for a country who didn't even bat an eye when they died.

God bless the United States of America.

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It was raining when we arrived. The cobblestone roads and pathways were slick beneath my shoes. My hat—according to Mother—was appropriate to my relationship to Johnny. There was no black veil as his mom wore. Johnny and I were never married, his mother—according to the US Army—was the only woman he left behind.

Tall officers held black umbrellas over Mother and I as we walked to the correct area, following close beside Johnny's mom, Lynette, and the Colonel. There were many representatives there, since his father was highly profiled. It was even rumored that President Roosevelt would make an appearance—then again, Mother did like her gossip.

If I turned around, I knew what I would see. Six men—all officers and known to his father—each gripping onto a single large wooden casket with the Stars and Stripes pulled tight over it. But I wouldn't see Johnny.

I wondered how many times in my life I looked behind me to see him standing there waiting for me, observing me, or pondering some obscure thought. How many times in his life did I tell him I loved him? Not nearly enough at the end. Of course I still loved him. He was a part of me, but I supposed the idea of loving him as anything more than a memory was moot.

I could hear Lynette's unbridled sobs next to me. I choked on my own, pulling out the embroidered handkerchief I had once gifted Johnny before he used it that same evening to tend to my knee when I fell. Mother's hand gripped the crook of my arm, her glove damp from the rain and her own tears.

We were all affected. The Colonel walked with his head high, but his usually stoic mask betrayed him as he faced the death of his only child. No matter how hard I gazed at the Colonel, I couldn't see much of Johnny there. He had favored his mother's side of the family.

The casket was placed on a pedestal beneath a large black tent. Small floral arrangements of white lilies and roses donned the area surrounding it and his enlistment photo, stood proudly to one side. His eyes were just the same—glittering with excitement and purpose. He hadn't wanted to join the Army, that was all the Colonel, but he was also very attuned to a sense of duty instilled in him at a young age.

"Father who art in heaven," the minister began, "hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

I tuned him out, staring at the box that now held the remains of my love. Behind it, in the rain, stood nine men in uniform. Two carried rifles, while six others had empty hands. The final man stood off to the side, braving the rain alone, a small trumpet held in one hand. I identified most with him. The odd man out—the man with one job to do, and separate from everyone else.

I was separate from all the other women who had been or would be in my position. Even my own mother had been granted the rights of a widow—because she had been married when her first love died for his country. I'm simply left over. I am the one he left behind, the excess, the fiancée. Not the wife. Not the widow. Barely the abandoned fiancée.

To everyone else, I was his "almost" but in the end, I wasn't. Not to me.

The men standing in the slow drizzle began to march, falling into formation to ceremoniously remove the flag from the sealed vessel where what remained of Johnny laid.

The lone trumpeter raised his instrument to his mouth, and a mournful song reverberated from the valves of the trumpet and into the valves of my heart, rearranging my emotions and pulling forth the sedated sobs of numbness.

The men lifted and began folding the flag with a level of stoicism that would make their commanders proud. To my left, Lynette was anything but stoic. Great sobs escaped from between her usually composed lips. The Colonel cried silently, his knuckles white as he gripped the hand of his wife.

The flag was handed from man to man to officer until the flag—the representation of Johnny’s service and sacrifice—bypassed me. The officer knelt before Lynette and placed the flag in her trembling hands. I squinted my eyes shut, blocking out the thoughts that threatened to overtake my consciousness.

I love you, Johnny. I’m sorry. I casted the thought into the soggy air around me, in hopes that he was somewhere near to catch a part of it.

The ceremony was over before it even seemed to begin. People began to stand around us. We—Johnny’s parents, myself and my parents—remained seated in the front row. The attendees paused before the symbol of what remained of Johnny’s physical being and paid their respects with a hand to the solid wood or a quiet, mumbled prayer. Then they passed through us in a line. I accepted people’s sympathy with quiet gratitude, offering my hand to those who made to reach for it and simply nodding at others.

Half-way through Lynette breached the gap between us and gripped my arm tightly. I looked up at her. She didn’t say anything, but her eyes seemed to will words of empathy from within me, “I know.”

Guests were departing, Johnny's parents and my own stood to one side conversing with the minister. I stepped forward, closing the gap between my aching heart and Johnny's still one.

I placed my hand on the soft wood of the lid. I yearned to feel the closeness and intimacy I once felt just by being near to Johnny. I yearned for the warmth of his chest and the security and strength in his arms around my body. I wanted nothing more than to feel a connection with my fiancé.

What I did feel was a hand on the space of my back between my shoulder blades. I turned and found Lynette standing beside me, gazing at the casket in front of us. She clutched the triangular flag to her chest, but held something out for me in her fist. I moved to take it from her and a jingle of metal dropped into my palm. His tags. My heart ached. I opened my mouth to tell her the truth—to tell her that the letter I set out to post when we received that fateful telegram was one that would have changed our lives just as much as the telegram itself.

But she wrapped her free arm around me, pulling me into her side. It was something she had done since I was waist-high to her. I closed my mouth, but it opened again of its own accord, a choking sob escaping. My knees shook beneath the draped velvet of my dress. I felt weak, drained of mental and emotional strength yet no longer filled with the numbness that I had absorbed like a white handkerchief dropped into a puddle of mud.

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The days following were filled with casseroles and well wishes. Johnny's parents stayed with us in South Carolina during their time of mourning until the army called the Colonel back to his job in north Texas. Lynette gripped my forearms in her anxious hands, and her brown eyes gifted me a glimmer of Johnny's own before they left with mournful waves.

Time passed, and I avoided contact with Lynette. I wanted to tell her, just to get it off my chest, but I wasn't sure if telling her would do anyone good but myself. A month after the funeral I

received a letter, but I didn't open it. It rested on my bedside table beside my unsent letter to Johnny that contained my request that we go our separate ways.

Two months and two more letters. Then they stopped arriving addressed to me. The well wishes and kind thoughts were passed along by Mother from her spot at our dining table as she sipped her tea.

I didn't deserve the relationship I had with Lynette. She was like a second mother to me. Her home was my home. Her kindness balanced the clinical demeanor of the Colonel in a way that left me yearning for her inviting home and the quiet love and acknowledgement of them both.

But she didn't deserve another broken heart. The wound was mending, sewing itself back together. I couldn't bear to tell her the state of Johnny and I's relationship in the end and risk ripping the stitches out.

So I walked into my childhood bedroom, picked up the unsent letter from my bedside table and dropped it on our dining table in front of Mother where she sat tending to her own correspondence.

"What's this?" she asked, her voice shaky after reading the address.

"The letter I wrote the day we received the telegram."

I didn't hesitate. I didn't want to stand there, head bowed in shame, as I exposed my broken heart and the lie I had been living since his death. I pulled on a light coat and gloves and ventured out into the sunny warmth yet brisk wind of the spring afternoon. Next door was Johnny's childhood home. It was small, now with a light green siding. It had been blue when Johnny was born and raised there until he joined the army and his father was stationed elsewhere.

I stopped before the large oak tree that occupied much of the space in the front yard. From a tall branch hung a swing. The wood was split and worn and the rope was frayed, but it gave only a small groan as I put my weight on it. I pushed my feet into the mud of the bare-spot where the grass had been worn away after years of abuse.

Where Johnny was, I was. Until now. Now, he was separate from me. "No longer with us" and "our dearly departed." But in that moment, I felt him there, on that swing in the front yard we once chased each other through. A breeze whipped through my hair, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

With fumbling fingers, I pulled the gloves from my hands, eager to feel the coarse rope against my skin. I placed the gloves in my lap, but as I casted off again, my foot slipped slightly in the mud as I swung into the air, and the white gloves fell into the puddle beneath me.