

GLENN MILLER WAS MISSING

Glenn Miller was missing. Somewhere over the English Channel, his plane went down in December 1944. Mother was upset because you'd been drafted, even with a wife and two daughters to support and day work in a defense plant and night work in the clubs, your teeth clamped onto the reed of a saxophone, chin tucked in, neck thrown back under the black and silver clarinet. Even in your tuxedo, you were slated for war. If Glenn Miller could die, you could die. I don't know what it looked like, you two too scared to be separated. They say your bags were packed for many months. You had to be ready to go. Even the birth of a third child couldn't stop it now.

By Springtime in Berlin Hitler was dead, or so it was reported. The war camps were being emptied of some, and filled with others. The boys were coming home, but no one was sure whether to celebrate or not. No one knew if you might still go or not. The war with Japan continued; scientists were speeding their experiments. Khaki uniforms crisscrossed the globe. Drop the bomb. Alternative plans on the political front. Pressure from the Allies. Hurry before they do it first! Americans were sick of war. In August were Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and I was born forty days later. In the hospital Mother counted all my fingers, all my toes, a baby whose father never had to go.

It's as though it was set like a bomb fifty years ago, and now it goes off when the phone rings and it's my mother calling to ask me if I know that she is leaving by air transport. She says, I'm leaving for the war, and her 85 year old voice begins to tremble. Will you take care of the children? she begs me, warning it's a big job. She is making these last requests of me, this woman forever in fear of what the neighbors would say this woman whose faults I am sick to death of listing and won't.

I think
how brave she is, this warrior, packed for the end,

ready to give her all for her country. So I lie to her,
and I tell her of course I will take care of
the children, they are such good girls. I thank her
for the sacrifice she is making for us all.
I pray you'll be home by Christmas, I say over the phone,
and I mean it.

I hope so, she whispers.

I imagine her head down, phone to her ear, talking into her breasts,
loose now in a loose gown. And then it is quiet.

I am lost in all of this when she starts to laugh nervously.

I've been sitting here with the other girls, she tells me.

Jane had a date last night. I just don't know why Daddy
hasn't come to pick me up. She begins
talking about you.

You over there on her dresser in the white tuxedo
with the black bow tie, your wavy hair so light,
your green eyes young in smoky shades of sepia.
And folded in the other photo next to you,
as you two were in the mahogany bed,
is this delicate young dark-eyed woman,
a farm girl pretending sophistication, a studio portrait,
something taken in the thirties, hinged there forever
looking out, not at us, not at each other, you have become
not even you, but Youth, so sweet so strange
to me to hear my mother now asking for you,
when the last time I saw you, your neck muscles
were finally surrendering to the pillow.
Then Anita wrapped your dentures in Kleenex, and
I tried to tie my silk scarf around your head
to keep your slack mouth shut, but the weight was too much
or the scarf was too narrow, or my will to force the act was too weak,
and we dragged home to tell our mother.
We lied to her that your death had been painless.
Now we conspire again to protect her
and I wonder if that's what you did
when she says she saw you just the other day and you acted
like you didn't even know her. I would never
cheat on Jimmy, she says to me now, I love him so much,
but I don't know if he loves me. Why doesn't he
come and get me?
her voice more and more desperate.
So I tell her you are nearby and she is safe right where
you want her to be, and she agrees that it's all for the best.
She lifts her voice, calls me by her sister's name, pauses and asks me,
and how are the children?

One thing I can't explain is how I feel when people say
it must be so hard to see your mother's mind fail,
when I feel like finally, finally,
all of her places and years come pouring out to me.
And I think it is me she tells these things to
only because I am here, and because

when Glenn Miller was missing and
she was afraid of war and so were you,
you comforted her all night long,
so that now, nine months and fifty years later,
when I walk through the door
with my trench coat folded over my arm,
her searchlights scan the dark waters of my green eyes,
still searching for you.

— dedicated to the memory of Peggy and Jimmy Sheaffer