

Too Proud

The Forties was not a good time for a thirty-eight-year-old widow to bring a bastard child into the world, but Bess was undeniably pregnant. She tried to hide it with over-sized rummage sale shirts, even though the inhabitants of small-town Podunk knew all there was to know about everybody else. She endured their furtive glances and hands-over-their-mouths whispers when she had to be out among them. Many times, Bess suffered humiliation when a long-time neighbor crossed the street to avoid her, like her condition was contagious. Overwhelmed with shame, she wouldn't appear in public unless there was no other option.

Twenty-five years earlier, Bess was forced by poverty to quit school before she completed eighth grade. She found work taking care of a neighbor's baby, pulling tassels off corn, picking tomatoes. Whatever money she made, she gave it to her father to help "put food on the table." When she turned 14, Bess lied about her age on a work application and got a job washing dishes and bussing tables at a truck stop. She was more than a little happy to get away from dirty diapers and muddy fields, enjoyed mixing with the diners and flirting with the truck drivers. And she met Johnny, the good-looking senior who, when he wasn't pumping gas for the truckers, endeared himself to her by clearing tables, washing pots and pans, pouring water and coffee.

"I want real bad to impress you," he told her.

Johnny, before he graduated, joined the war effort. Bess had been watching the newsreels, reading the magazines with their gory photos from the trenches in Europe. When he, on his knee, asked her to marry him, she was delighted and scared.

"You know I want to, I really want to, but you'll be leaving for the Army," Bess cried. "What if . . . ?"

"I'll be doing my duty," he interrupted, "just like everybody else." He put his arms around her, pulled her close, whispered. "There's nothing I want more than to be your husband, Bessie. Don't you worry."

As soon as he finished boot camp, Johnny and Bess stood before a Justice of the Peace and exchanged vows. Their honeymoon was two nights in a dingy, dank, room at the truck stop motel before he left for Europe. Bess was almost sixteen.

Johnny saw the worst of the war when the Allies launched an attack on the German forces in the Belleau Woods of France. At home, Bess prayed daily for his life to be spared, was terrified that her husband's name would appear in a list of the fallen in the local newspaper.

They felt like the luckiest people in the world when Johnny came marching home again, as they later joked, to 'his Bessie.'

In the ensuing years, Bess was pregnant more than either of them wanted. With their fourth child on the way, Johnny reluctantly left his car repair job to take a good-paying manufacturing job in Chicago to "get us the Hell out of debt." Bess watched him board a Greyhound bus every Sunday to travel the 100 miles north. Johnny worked twelve-hour days, slept on a cot at the YMCA, heated soup on a kerosene stove. On Friday nights, Bess would be waiting at the bus stop when he took the same route back to Podunk. Her heart beat a little faster when he hurried towards her, tossed his duffel bag aside, picked her up and swung her around.

Her lips on his ear, she whispered, "How I've missed you." Bess put her arm around John's waist, held him tight as they walked home together.

"You know I hate being away from you," he said, "but we're still young. We'll be growing old together."

He put together enough money to make a down payment on a tiny house dwarfed by cornfields in every direction. Bess couldn't hide her disappointment when she saw it for the first time, noticed the cracked linoleum and drafty windows, a coal-burning stove that spewed black smoke. An outhouse.

"Come on Bessie. Don't get too proud on me. This here's our dream house," he joked. "We'll fix it up."

John had been at the manufacturing plant almost two years when one unlucky morning, a piece of steel flew off a grinder and into his eye. An infection set in right away, and the next day, he boarded the Greyhound back to Podunk.

Bess sat by his bedside for days, putting cold cloths on his head and a thermometer under his tongue, giving him sips of water.

One sorry day, the doctor told her, "There's nothing more I can do. Try to keep him comfortable."

Bess lay in the bed with him, her hand over his heart, willing it to keep on beating. When he breathed his last breath, gasping, “Bessie. My Bessie,” she felt it hot on her cheek, was filled with despair.

At the funeral, she knew she was an object of pity, sitting in the front pew, holding her baby while the other three huddled close. She hoped the children wouldn’t overhear the whispers.

“It’s so sad. Poor John survived the war just to come home and die of blood poisoning.”

“Poor Bessie’s the one I feel sorry for.”

“If you ask me, he shouldn’t have been up there in Chicago. Leaving his wife alone with all them kids.”

Though bereft, Bess had little time to grieve. The small pension from John’s employer wouldn’t begin to take care of four kids. As distasteful as it was to her, Bess visited the welfare office. She went to rummage sales on weekends for school clothes and shoes. Every night in the winter months, she “borrowed” coal, as she put it, from the railroad’s stockpile. Pulling a small wagon, she trudged through the snow in her heavy coat and gloves, showed up at the coal sheds by the tracks right before the 12:45 a.m. came thundering through.

Within a few years, when the oldest kids were able to help out with the younger ones, Bess got a job. An unexpected benefit of waitressing was the respite it provided from the interminable loneliness.

She had been a widow for eight long years when Frank, charismatic and bold, ambled into the diner, straddled a stool, crossed his arms, placed his elbows on the counter, leaned forward. Smiled.

“Got somethin’ good to eat, Hon?”

“I haven’t seen you around here before,” Bess said, handing him a menu.

“I live a couple of towns down the road,” Frank answered, “but if I’d known someone as pretty as you was workin’ here, I’d of been in a lot sooner.”

Bess was unaccustomed to being flattered by a man. She felt flustered. Her face turned red.

Frank didn't fail to notice. "Damn. I've embarrassed you." He grinned at her. "But I don't see a ring on your finger, so I assume I'm not out of line. Tell me I'm right."

"My husband passed away," she said.

"Well, I'm sure sorry to hear that, ahhh, what was your name?"

Bess was dizzy with delight at being courted again. She was thrilled when Frank picked her up in his sleek, new Cadillac. "This car's a 'Sixty Special,' Bessie. It cost me over \$2,000. You look good in it."

He took her out to late suppers after her shift. They went to Saturday night dances in the town hall, made love in a rented room or the back seat of his car. They watched local teams play baseball, went for long walks by the creek that ran through town. They parked by a small lake and listened to FDR's Fireside Chats, Fibber McGee and Molly. The Shadow.

Frank never offered to take her to his house. Bess, smitten, refused to think about the implications of this. She prayed daily she wouldn't get pregnant, but after they'd courted six months, she was about four months along. Anxious and afraid, she gave Frank the news, assuming he would do the right thing. It was then she learned about his philandering ways. It was then he told her about his wife and kids in that town 'down the road'. It was then he told her of his unhappy marriage, of his plan to divorce his wife and move out West with yet another woman, and Bess's heart was ripped apart for the second time.

Alone, ashamed and depressed, Bess could barely summon the strength to show up for work at the diner. When her pregnancy became obvious, her boss called her into his small, dingy office. "You're not gonna like this, Bessie, but I've got to be honest with you. You know darn well it's not right for an unmarried woman, pregnant like I know you are, to be strutting around in front of these high school kids coming in here after classes to have themselves a Coke."

Bess fought back panic. Fought back tears. Fought back the urge to scream. "Mr. Rasmussen. I need this job," she managed to say.

"I know you do, Bessie, and believe me, I'm sorry to have to do this. But the people around here won't go for no pregnant waitress. Especially . . ."

"Don't say it again," she cried.

“Some might say you’re too proud, Bess. But there’s always welfare. You know that routine and you can qualify again, since you’ve still got kids at home and all.”

Frank knocked on Bess’s front door a month before their baby was due. When she saw him standing there, her hand shot to her mouth and that now familiar pain filled her chest. Tears leapt from her eyes.

“Bess.” Frank held out his hand. “Here. Take this. You’ll be needin’ some money.”

His bright blue Cadillac was parked in the street, the engine running, the familiar back seat piled high with suitcases. His about-to-be new wife was sitting in the passenger seat. The whole neighborhood heard the cry that erupted from Bess’s gut before she slapped the money from Frank’s hand.

“You’re too proud, Woman. Don’t be foolish. I’m tryin’ to help you out, here.”

Bess fell to her knees, gasping, her arms around her huge belly. Frank reached out to her, tried to help her up.

Bess screamed, “Don’t touch me. Go on to California.” She managed to get inside, slam the door.

Frank picked up the money, tucked the bills behind the doorknob, and drove away, never to be seen again by Bess, never to be seen at all by his unborn child.

She vowed that day to never again utter his name.

A month later, Bess, tears streaming unceasingly from her eyes, delivered her daughter at home. Afterwards, as the doctor hastily filled out the necessary forms, he asked, “Can you give me the father’s name, Bess?”

Exhausted, she turned her head away, didn’t answer.

“You know, I’m sure, I have to put something down here.”

She rose up on one elbow, motioned for the doctor to lay the papers on the bed, hand her the pen. In the place where the father’s name should have appeared on the birth certificate, Bess wrote, “Unknown.”

She knew how this would be interpreted, but her pride wouldn’t allow anything else.

