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AIRBASE

by Jayne Marek

Engines screamed as the gigantic dark-green jet swung down towards the landing field, barely a dozen yards above 112th Street. Lou winced as if she feared the plane were going to strike the roof of her Escort. She swerved to the shoulder as an oncoming pickup braked, and the driver swiveled around to look. Damn Rubberneck Road, Lou thought, clinging to the wheel. Her car shuddered in the engine's backdraft as the transport lumbered on, settling with a jolt just beyond the wire fence that separated the Air Force field from the roadway. The pickup truck jerked back into motion. Lou shook her head. Darn drivers act as if they'd never seen one of those things before. Lou glanced over at the C-130, now half a mile down the runway and revving up again for the takeoff, and smiled to herself. The boys were standing on it again. Having a little fun while they learned to serve their country. Lou just wished they didn't sometime shake the dishes right off her shelves.

It was something you put up with if you lived around the field: the roar of transports practicing touch-and-go, engines moaning in neutral at 4 a.m., fighters like gray darts shrieking upwards in matched pairs, the distant boom of artillery practice from the Army base down the road. Price of liberty, I suppose, Lou mused as she

turned off onto a street lined with small shingled houses. Guess I don't mind. At least we won't get invaded. Lou smiled at the thought. It reminded her of something her father used to say during the war. Nowadays Tacoma is probably a red spot on some Communist's map, she supposed. You wouldn't know it was coming until it was too late. Lou pulled in front of a gray picket fence, turned off the engine and waited for the brief flurry of dieseling to die away, then shoved open the reluctant car door and headed toward the front of her house.

While she fumbled with her key ring, Lou noticed fresher scratches in the wood around the lock. Art must have tried to use the wrong key again. She wished her son would remember to use the back door, but knew he would never remember when he was drunk. Sometimes he was in a hurry, too, or he just forgot. He had keys for his own apartment as well as this house; if you have too many, you mix them up once in a while. And he had keys for work. At least the boy has work. She let herself in, shivering, turned up the heat, set a kettle of water, and sat down with the paper.

As she read, the gray light from the window began to fade. It was late winter, and the days were lengthening, but dusk still gathered by five-thirty. Lou's few bulky pieces of furniture added to the darkness in the living room, and her newspaper glowed gently. Along the walls hung a dozen porcelain plates, poorly handpainted in mild pastels, which reflected cold ovals into the dimming room. Lou read with her head tipped back because of the bifocals that Art had made her buy. She didn't really mind them, but they took

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some getting used to. After all, she was only fifty-three, and hadn't her father resisted getting his spectacles until he was nearly seventy? But he had been a determined man, she thought, looking up from a hardware ad. His life taught him to be tough. Lou admired that. It got things done.

Lou read, one part of her mind taking in the information on the pages, another part trying to decide what to have for supper. This, coupled with the slippery action of the bifocals, made her a little confused, especially when she didn't quite finish one article before skipping to the next. Finally, she closed her eyes. After a few moments, she heard the kitchen doorknob turn and the front door bump in its frame as the back door opened. The kitchen light snapped on. A step ground on the linoleum, then another. A brief pause. "Mom, you home?" Lou smiled. His voice sounded low and even.

"Yes, Art. Just resting a little before supper."

As she began to twist the cap off one of the jars, she had a strange sensation, and looked up.

"Oh." She heard two more steps. "Don't see anything going."

"Nope, I haven't started yet. What do you want?"

"Oh, anything." He had reached the living room door.

Lou looked up. Art's sloping shape nearly filled the bright yellow rectangle. The light slid down his hair and across his collar, down the decline of his shoulder, bulged slightly around his elbows and middle, and fell to rest on his work boots. For a moment she was amused to think that he looked somewhat like a slug -- tubular, in a way. Or maybe like a young dog -- not quite formed yet, still soft with youthful fat. But as he moved forward the light changed, and he was just Art, in

plain denim jacket and jeans, his damp brown hair always in need of a trim. He leaned down to kiss her and she felt a flash of satisfaction to smell bologna and sugar cookies on his breath.

"Dark in here," said Art. He reached across Lou and switched on a small table lamp. Lou exclaimed, and jumped up to draw the drapes. Art stood where he was. "Why d'you always do that?"

"I just don't want the neighbors to see in, that's all," Lou answered. Wasn't it obvious? The biggest window faced the street, and in the evening without the blinds closed whatever happened in the living room would be like a play, lit for everyone to see. Lou couldn't stand that. While her father had lived here in the last years of his life, he had always made sure the blinds were shut as soon as the house lights started coming on.

Lou turned and smiled at Art, then headed into the kitchen. Art followed and sat at the table while Lou lifted out spaghetti noodles, jars of sauce, spoons and pots, and began the daily bustle of preparations, the motions so familiar that she scarcely needed to think. Art produced a folded auto magazine from his jacket pocket and let it fall open to the center pages.

Lou held up the end of a loaf of white bread. "If we toast it with garlic butter, it should be all right," she said, half to herself. "Tried it like that last time the loaf went . . ." She glanced at Art, but didn't look up. Usually he didn't have much to say after work, and often he didn't even come until seven or so. Lou spent most of her days alone and had developed the habit of talking to herself. Sometimes her partial hissed a little when she did. She giggled at the thought.

Art looked up. "What?"

"Nothing." She waved one hand while stirring the noodles. As she began to twist the cap off one of the jars, she had a strange sensation, and looked up. Art was still staring at her, his eyes small. Pain flared in her chest. She realized she

was gripping the jar very tightly; her hand twanged. Slowly she put the jar down.

"What's the matter, Art?" she asked, her voice low.

"You were laughing," he said, his hand spread on the table.

"It was just at a thought I had." The last words tightened as the back of her throat dried.

"It was at me, wasn't it?"

"No." She shook her head, then turned and began to stir the noodles again, staying quite steady. "No, of course not."

"Course not," he repeated. "Course not what? Laughing at me and my stupid magazine?"

She couldn't have known – he hadn't smelled of alcohol, so she thought she had nothing to fear.

His hand twisted the cover of it. "The kind of stupid magazine that Art reads." From the corner of her eye she could see his shape beginning to waver, as if he were going to rise from his chair. The metal legs creaked. She snatched the spoon from the pot and banged it against the side.

"No, Art, I was laughing at myself. Just myself. Something I thought of."

He rose slowly. "You were laughing at me and my magazine. I know." His six-foot shape seemed like that of a light-blue bear in the corner of the tiny room. Her lungs failed; she had to turn and face him fully.

"Art, I don't . . ." She saw now that his pupils seemed odd, very dark and flat despite the overhead light. He seemed to be staring both at and through her, towards the pot of boiling noodles or the open cupboard door behind her. His face was stiff. She couldn't have known -- he hadn't smelled of alcohol, so she thought she had nothing to fear. She didn't know enough about what kids did these days. It was alcohol her father had always warned her about. Not whatever this might be.

"Art, don't . . . I . . ." As he stepped closer she had to tip her head back to see his face clearly, but it kept splitting, one part enormous, the other part small and far away, as if he were still a baby, crawling toward her across this same kitchen floor. The dark enormous figure raised a huge hand, while the tiny figure appeared to try to reach her, and in terror she stretched a hand towards him while the massive shadow came another step closer and then she had to close her eyes and listen to the sound of the noodles boiling and popping furiously just next to her elbow. There were clanging noises too, as if she had forgotten to take the spoon out of the pot and it was being banged against the side by the billowing water, rising and falling violently and making a sound that was very familiar but still seemed awful and strange. There were loud sounds like distant discharges and the cupboard doors rattled - was a transport going over? Below the volume of the louder sounds she heard hissing and wondered whether it was her partial, because she seemed to be trying to speak; but it didn't seem to be in her mouth anymore. Her tongue tasted of metal. She opened her eyes and suddenly saw her dental plate, blurry, in front of her, on the floor, white and pink, and her own pink hand lying alongside as if reaching to retrieve it. They lay still, as if the plane had finished going over. Beyond them lay a thin ring of gold which reminded her of her glasses.

Are the noodles done? she wondered. It seemed as if only a moment had passed, but her arm was very heavy and the hand only scuttered a little towards her as she tried to lift it. The hissing was louder; its anger seemed to press her to the floor. Something smelled. Lou felt the smell burst into pain inside her head. She groaned, and the pink hand slid closer until it rested under her chin. She waited, listening to the hissing, until the blurred floor relaxed and she pulled herself to her knees, reached up and turned off the burner. Then

she leaned against the old white bulk of the stove for awhile until the noise had completely stopped.

She felt cold, and turned. The back door was slightly ajar. Down the street she could hear a car motor whir down and stop, and half a mile away there was an idling drone of jet engines. Another one waiting to take off, she thought, confused. It was the noise of the jets that sometimes set him off. But what can I do? I can't just call up the Air Force and tell them to stop what they're doing because the noise bothers my son. And this is where I live. You have to make the best of where you are.

She thought for a minute of her father's face, warm and rosy as he used to sit at the kitchen table before he became so sick, and thought she heard his voice. "It's something that all of us have to do," he had once said, when they didn't have quite enough to eat. "We'll get by the way we always have."

Lou tried to giggle at that, but her back felt stabbed through. This time it had been quick, at least, she thought. Slowly, she began to pick up her partial and her bifocals, and put the pieces on the counter next to the pot of ruined noodles. When she finished she paused. Let's see. That transport that went over was awfully close. I'd better check

the plates in the living room. As she turned to swing shut the door, she heard the engines kick up a pitch. Then the doorlatch caught, and from the living room she heard a boot scrape against a shard of glass. Lou's heart jumped.

He's still here, she thought. Her head hurt, so she pressed a palm to it, trying to help clear it. She looked toward the door. The light in the living room had somehow gone off, but she could imagine him in the dim room lighted only by the broken reflections of her painted dishes. That sound -- he must be picking them up. He must be all right now and he's picking them up. I'll go thank him and tell him I'll finish fixing supper in a minute, when I feel better. Lou slid one hand along the wall as she began walking toward the black doorway.

