

A Heavy Yoke

By Monica Coffey

The heavy rain poured down hard on Betty as she slowly trudged down Franklin Street. Her worn-out clothes pressed against her skin, and her whole body ached from hours of walking around the streets of Brooklyn selling eggs to anyone who would buy them. It had been years since her father lost his steady job, leaving it up to Betty and her siblings to provide for their family. These times were hard for everyone, so she tried her best not to complain. Betty wouldn't mind her job; she could even bear the humiliation of selling eggs to her friends' parents, but it was the boredom and lack of excitement that made it so unbearable. At least she didn't have to scrub toilets at the factory like her sister Inez. For that she was grateful. That and the usual company of her best friend as she sold her eggs. James had a strenuous job working part-time with the railroad, but he always met her after his shift to accompany her on her rounds. She would never admit to James how much his company meant to her, but the time he spent with Betty always made her boring days more interesting.

Today however, James had not yet come to meet her, and Betty scolded herself at her disappointment that he might not come at all. She knew his job was extremely difficult and tiresome, but she had grown so used to his daily company that she couldn't help wishing he still might come. Just when Betty decided she would have to continue selling eggs alone, her thoughts were interrupted by that familiar voice calling her name. Turning on the spot, she saw James running towards her, his unruly hair flying in every direction, with a bundle of drooping wildflowers in his hands.

The nerve of that boy.

When he finally caught up to her, he was out of breath, but managed to gain his composure almost immediately.

"My lady," James said with that typical smirk on his face, but lacking his usual cheerful tone and handed Betty the wildflowers.

"You're late today," she said jokingly and continued walking. She noticed James seemed a little out of spirits, and after a few minutes of silent walking, Betty knew he wasn't telling her something. "Everything ok?" she asked casually because she knew James hated when people asked him too many questions. "Just

a long day at work,” he said rather quietly, confirming to Betty that this was exactly what was not bothering him. She decided not to pester him further, though, and they continued walking in silence. Suddenly James stopped.

“Betty, I’ve been drafted.” Now it was her turn to stop. She turned to look at him, not knowing what to say. Thanking him for “risking his life” and “serving his country” would be insincere; they both knew that James going to war was the last thing she wanted. Betty knew America had already joined the war, but she never allowed herself to dwell on the possibility of someone she loved actually fighting in it. James’ unwelcome declaration suddenly made Betty realize how much he meant to her and how little she had done in their many years of friendship to show him because she assumed he’d always be there.

“How soon do you leave?” She knew it was a stupid thing to ask since she knew it would be very soon, but didn’t know what else to say.

“Two weeks from tomorrow.”

James will be fighting halfway across the world in less than three weeks. Her eyes stung at the heartbreaking thought; she felt her throat tighten. “Oh James.” It was all she could say. They stared at each other for a moment in silence until James slowly walked over to her, wrapping her in a tight hug. They each meant everything to each other and loved each other, not romantically, but in the way two best friends do. Betty was angry James had been drafted, but she knew that even though he was scared, there was nothing more noble to him than proudly fighting for his country. “You are very brave,” she whispered.

“I want to be.”

After a moment he squeezed her tightly, pulled away, and smiled. “Not as brave as you, though, having to manage here without me.” His cheerful tone and playful grin were back. “You wish,” she said as she playfully shoved him. Betty admired his attempt to bring things back to normal, even though she knew things may not be normal for a very long time. James hated serious situations, so despite her sadness, she decided to treat the next two weeks like any other two weeks spent selling eggs with James throughout Brooklyn. The rain continued to pour down on them as they resumed walking, talking and laughing like they always did while Betty sold her eggs. The seriousness of their recent conversation was definitely not forgotten, but rather accepted. They both knew there was no use in wasting their remaining days together in sadness and regret over James’ unfair

fate. After all, boys and men all over the country were suffering from the same fate, and wishing it weren't true wouldn't change it. As they walked, Betty reminded herself of this. James was the greatest person she'd ever known, and he was now the bravest she'd ever known as well. He would need to be strong while fighting, and Betty would also have to be strong without him. Losing your best friend isn't the exact same as fighting a war, and she knew her task was much easier than his, but this would have to be her small sacrifice for her country, her sacrifice for James.