The Waiting

The room was one lived in by someone with obvious army connections – a framed photograph of a marching band, service medals, and a set of silver-topped, bandmaster batons adorned the walls. And a dozen framed photographs, each in fading black and white, covered the top of the old piano: groups of young men in khaki uniforms, some atop jeeps or leaning against troop carriers. They were lean and tanned, squinting against the harsh glare of the desert sun. And in the centre, one stood out – a handsome man in his early thirties, he stared out at the living-room, a place he'd once called home.

Joyce stirred the pot and handed her daughter a cup.

"How're you doing mum?"

"Well, y'know, up and down."

Anne nibbled at her malted-milk biscuit. It had been nearly forty years since Lieutenant Ian Ireland, 'Dad', had left the house, kit-bag slung over his shoulder, to disappear down the garden path… forever.

"But, are you sleeping better?"

Her mother shook her head. "The doctor suggested tablets, but that'll not bring him back, will it? It's the pain of not knowing; you know, what happened to him. Was he killed, lost in action, lost his memory… what?"

Ann leant forwards and took her mother's hand.

"I know, Mum. I feel it too. I hardly knew him, but I can still see him on the step, cigarette in hand, and that faraway look in his eyes." She glanced at the photograph. "And the Army? What did they say, last time you phoned?"

"Not much - wouldn't deny or confirm that he was dead or alive. And with him having no other family, they confirmed that their enquiries had come to an end. No more to be said."

"So, no hope of a widow's pension, then?"

"No." Joyce smiled ruefully, took another biscuit, and looked out of the window.

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The urgent ringing of the telephone woke Joyce from her afternoon nap. Half past four. Too early for Ann. "Hello? Who is it?"

A stranger's voice told her he was from the Salvation Army, Missing Persons Unit. "We believe you've been looking into the whereabouts of a certain Ian Ireland – your husband. Am I correct?"

"Well, yes, but…" Joyce searched for her glasses.

"Good. I may have some news for you. A Mrs Edna Ireland has some information to relay. Have you a pen and paper?"

"Yes, but Ian didn't have any famil-"

"Take down this number– it's rather long I'm afraid…"

The next day, Ann by her side, she dialled, hesitantly. The ringing sounded a long way away. A female voice answered.

“Hello. Edna Ireland.” A distinctly Aussie twang. “Can I help you?”

“Hello. I’m *Joyce* Ireland. I was told you have news of my husband, Ian Ireland.” Joyce’s throat tightened.

“*Your* husband?” Silence. “And *my* husband too. I knew it! A flamin’ bigamist. He’s done a runner, but don’t you worry love, we’ll…”

Joyce dropped the phone.

All those years.

All those wasted years.