

The Silver Plane

Charlotte Walton

THE model airplane was almost finished. It stood poised on Richard's desk, needing only to be painted and given the finishing touches.

"It looks like a real one, Dickie. Almost like it could take off right now. It kind of looks silver already, even without the paint."

"Dope, Idiot, not paint. Don't you know anything, Buffy? Hey, get your elbows off the desk. You'll knock it."

Richard reached for his sister's hair to pull her back. She ducked mechanically, acting out of long practice, and slid out from under his hand and ran over to his bed.

"You leave me alone, Richard Bartlett, you leave me alone. I'll tell Mamma you've been picking on me again 'cause I'm too little to fight back." She climbed onto the bed and sat glaring at him, shaking her head rhythmically so that her curls bounced from one shoulder to the other. "Yah, yah, yah, I'll tell Mamma on you. Yah, yah, yah, I'll tell Mamma on you," she sing-songed.

The boy turned his back to her and stared at the plane. "Aw, I wasn't gonna hurt you. I just didn't want your dirty ol' paws on my plane. Quit your squallin'."

He dropped to his knees and leaned his elbows on the desk chair, gazing up at the plane. "Look at it, Buffy, just look at it. It does look silver right now. Isn't it the best plane in the world? Isn't it the neatest thing you ever saw?"

Buffy slid down from the bed, bumping her rubber heels hard on the floor when she reached it and ran across to Richard.

"Tell me about it, Dickie."

"Tell you what, Stinky?"

"Tell me how it's going to be and what's going to happen."

"I've told you that a million and a half times already, why do you wanta hear it again?"

She tugged at his shirt tail. "Because I want to hear it, that's why," she said. "Tell me all about when Daddy comes home."

"O. K., I suppose I haff to." Richard straddled the chair, leaning the back of it against the desk, and stroked the little plane slowly with one finger.

"She's a P-38, just like Dad flew in the War, see? And . . ."

"When he was a brave hero," Buffy interrupted.

"Uh-huh, the bravest hero in the whole Air Force. He got the Bronze Star and the DSC from the General."

The little girl gazed at her brother in awe. "And you were there, weren't you?"

Richard frowned and nodded his head. "Yeah, I was there, but I don't remember much. Mom had to hold me up to see things. I was just a squirt then, like you."

"I'm not a squirt. I go to school the same place you do."

"You're a squirt in the first grade. That's not even school hardly. You can't even read yet. You're just a dumb squirt."

Buffy screwed her face up until her eyes were shut tightly and hiccupped twice. Richard stuck his tongue out at her scornfully and turned back to the plane. "Anyway, Baby-Talk, she's a P-38. Just like a real one, even to the controls on the cockpit. See? I copied them from a book. You can tell what she is right away by the double fuselage."

He squirmed into a more comfortable position on the tilted chair. "She isn't painted yet, but she will be—all silver."

"With wings on the wings, too, won't she, Dickie?"

"Not wings, Stupid, insignia. Just like Dad had. And there'll be a picture of a girl in a bathing suit, with 'Smilin' Sal' under it, and. . . ."

"'Smilin' Sal' is for Mamma, isn't it, Dickie?" Buffy asked. By this time she was lying on her stomach, kicking her feet in the air.

"Yep. Pull your dress down. Your pants show, just like some dumb baby. Sometimes I think you never will grow up. Sometimes I think girls never grow up at all, not even Mom."

Buffy gasped. "Oh, Dickie, you shouldn't say such horrible things. Something bad will happen. Say you don't mean it, quick."

"You're silly. Nothin's gonna happen. Besides, she cries all the time like a baby, doesn't she? That's what women are, babies. Not men, like me and Dad."

"Tell me about men," said Buffy. "Tell about Daddy coming home."

Richard gazed at the plane vaguely, as if he were looking at something far away from the tiny ply-wood model. "He'll come home, Buffy, he'll come home." The boy was chanting, the way a child repeats a story he has heard told many times. "He'll walk in the front door and yell for us. And he'll be big, and strong, and his voice will be deep when he yells. And he'll hug Mom, like he used to, and throw you up to the ceiling and catch you, and say how much you've grown while he was gone. Then. . . ."

"And I can show him where my tooth came out, can't I, Dickie?" asked Buffy, bouncing up and pointing to the gap in her front teeth with one finger.

"Don't interrupt me. And then, Buff, he'll look at me and ask me if I was a man and took care of you and Mom and feel my biceps and ask me what I've been doing with myself."

"Then we'll show him the plane," said Buffy.

"Then I'll show him the plane," answered Richard. "And he'll look at it and pick it up and see that it's just like his, and he'll tell me all about the gun mountings and how many r.p.m.'s the motor has and why there are two. . . ."

The banging of the front door carried through the house. Buffy squealed "There's Mamma," and scurried from the room. Richard lingered. He sat staring at the plane and running his finger along its smooth body.

He was still sitting there, dreaming at the plane, when he heard the hinges on the door creak, and turned his head. Buffy was standing in the half-open doorway, rubbing her eyes with her fists.

Richard glared at her. "What's the matter, Cry-Baby?" he demanded. "Quit rubbing your eyes, you're getting your face all dirty. Go get Mom to wash it."

Buffy ignored his command and stood still, rubbing the tears running down her face into her grimy cheeks. Her brother stood up angrily, letting the chair crash to the floor.

"For gosh sakes, do you hafta just stand there and bawl? What's eating you?"

"Dickie," she sniffled.

"That's my name, don't wear it out. Whatta you want?"

"Dickie, Mamma's home."

"She usually does come home. She lives here. Isn't that all right with you?"

"Mama's crying, Dickie. She got a letter from Daddy. I saw it. Oh Dickieeeee!" She ran to her brother and started to clutch him around the waist.

Richard grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "Quit bawling and tell me what happened. When's he coming home? What's the matter?"

She gulped back a sob and blinked her eyes at him. "Don't shake me, Dickie, I didn't do anything."

He only shook her again, harder. "Tell me what happened. Tell me."

"He said . . . he . . ." she broke into tears again.

"Tell me."

"He . . . he isn't coming home, Dickie . . . not ever."

She gasped and forgot to cry, as she stared at her brother. Suddenly she screamed at him.

"Don't, Dickie. Don't. What are you doing to the plane? Don't break the silver plane, Dickie. It isn't even painted yet."

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The following short story received honorable mention.