

Aza Pace

“Michael”

After dinner, when the sky was blushing dark blue in the windows, Michael put on his uniform for Mama and Dad to admire. I was supposed to *ooh* and *ahh* over him too, but I didn't. Instead, I stood with my arms crossed behind Mama's rocking chair.

Mama smiled at me and said, “Come closer, Phoebe, come see. Doesn't your brother look grown up?”

I just frowned and said, “I can see him.”

Dad was standing a few feet back from Michael and looking him over like he would a new car. He nodded appreciatively and clapped Michael on his manly shoulder, hitting just above the place where a single chevron had been stitched.

“You'll make our country proud, son,” he said, and Michael nodded once.

Mama was circling Michael with a big teary smile dimpling her cheeks, like my brother was some work of art she had to admire from all angles. She ran her fingers over Michael's crisp sleeves, his starched collar.

“Aw, dontcha look s'big and strong,” she said.

Michael smiled at her.

Then she turned to me and said, “Doesn't he, honey?”

Michael looked over at me. He gave his crooked little smile which was just like mine, and turned in a circle for me like he was modeling his new self.

I pursed my lips and muttered, “He just looks old is all.”

I saw Michael's smile fall a little, and I felt sort of bad. But I looked him up and down again: his cropped hair and straight back, his shiny shoes and shell of a uniform; and I couldn't find my brother in there.

“Phoebe, dontcha think I look nice?” Michael said.

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Mama and Dad watched me and waited. Mama was smiling. Dad was just watching.

I looked at Michael.

My brother had curly hair, but you couldn't tell now. He used to wear mismatched socks, but not anymore. He used to always wear this dumb bracelet I'd made him at school once, but it wasn't part of his uniform now.

My brother was eighteen, but now I thought he looked about thirty.

"You just look old," I said again.

Mama started to say, "No, Phoebe, please don't."

But Dad interrupted her to point a finger at me and say, "Your brother's a brave man, Phoebe Marie. He's gonna be one of the people that keep you safe at night. You oughta give him some respect, young lady."

At the same time, Mama said, "John", and Michael said, "Dad" like they wanted him to calm down.

But I could already feel my throat getting real tight and my eyes all burny.

I looked at my dad, and I looked at Michael, and I just turned and ran.

Out the back door and into the street I ran. I didn't stop when I heard a voice call, "Phoebe Marie you get back here!"

Mama called, "Honey please," but I didn't stop then either.

I ran under the streetlights with fat tears racing down my cheeks, and then realized I was counting the streetlights as I went, "five, six, seven", counting instead of saying goodbye. I ran until I was out of breath, which was about four blocks from home. Only when I stopped was I able to hear the footsteps chasing after me. I turned around and saw Michael jog to a stop just a few feet away.

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"Phoebe," he said, opening his arms just a little.

I felt my eyes burning again, and ran to hug my brother. I let myself cry on Michael's starchy collar, and he didn't seem to mind.

"Hey," he said gently, "hey, it's okay."

"No," I said roughly, "because you're going away. And you look old."

Michael laughed a little.

"Well, I'm not old," he said. "And I'm leaving, but not forever. How could you think I could leave you for good? A cutie like you? No chance."

I smiled up at him.

"C'mon," he said, "let's go back home."

Michael took my hand, and we turned back toward our house four blocks or seven streetlights away.

"Yeah," said Michael, "when I get there, I'm gonna tell all my new buddies that I've got this beautiful girl waiting for me back home."

I smiled up at him again, watching his face against the night sky.

"Yep. I'm gonna tell them her name's Phoebe. And she's got curly hair and a crooked smile."