

Teddy Arnold

This was the seventh day of the Six Days' War, and I was a nervous wreck. My four children were on active duty, and I was out on my ear. If there is one thing worse than being in an ongoing war, it is being out of it.

The children had phoned or sent word, but I felt like a piece of furniture past serviceable age. I had had to go to Tel Aviv to do some necessary but frustrating things. I was tired and fretful and wanted badly to wind down before the long drive home, so I went to the flat of a woman friend, a placid and friendly soul who would give me a cup of tea and tut-tut to my damning all and sundry.

She was not home, but her seventeen-year-old daughter was. She was pleased to see me. "Do sit down, Teddy, mummy will be here any moment. I'll give you a cup of tea."

She was pleasant to behold, very pretty, long legs, short skirt, obviously destined to become a mother in Israel. It occurred to me that few young men would refuse to cooperate.

I was hardly settled with my cup of tea when one such came in. He was well-scrubbed and wore the fresh uniform of one of our few infantry regiments. He had a forty-eight hour leave and came straight from the war - he had not been home yet. This seemed to denote unusual devotion, and I felt that I should not stand in the way to bringing my friend's daughter nearer to motherhood. I stood up, shook the young man's hand and made to depart. The girl gave me a positively beseeching look.

"Please stay, Teddy, mummy will be here directly!"

For some reason or other, she did not want to be alone with the corporal. I sat down again.

The young man accepted a cup of tea, took one sip and started talking. I probably had not slept for a week, was battle-fatigued and had a talking jag. For reasons unknown to me, I am a natural victim of people with talking jags. Though I was not the target of this one, it was the most fascinating one I have ever heard.

He was lucid and well-spoken. He gave a day-to-day report of what he and his unit had done and where they had been. He almost whispered.

The two young people sat in easy-chairs, with a lamp between them. Their

faces were illuminated as in a stage production: His, the skin tight over high cheekbones, drawn with fatigue as the words tumbled out of him compulsively. Hers, like a flower opening, first entranced, then, unbelieving, then, bored. There is a glass wall between combatants and others, the non-combatant forever questioning: How can men do this to each other?

I leaned back in the shadows, listening, listening. The girl pulled herself together, becoming aware that she wasn't showing any interest. She felt she had to ask a question.

"Did you take many prisoners?"

"Oh, yes, the first two days we took lots and lots of prisoners. But then we found the two pilots."

"What pilots?"

"Two of our pilots. They were stark naked. Their...their genitals had been cut off and stuffed in their mouths. Otherwise, there wasn't a scratch on them. The medic said they had bled to death. The C.O. made us all look at them. They still had their dog-tags. After that, we didn't take any more prisoners."

The girl's lips were curled back in disgust. After a while, she brought herself to ask: "What then did you do?"

The young man's eyes opened wide in surprise. "We cut them down."

There was a long pause. The door opened and the girl's mother came in. She greeted the two young people with a wave of the hand. "Hi, Yair!" Then, she saw me and came over. I stood up, and she kissed me on the lips. It was a pleasant enough experience, but I felt that she should have bestowed this salutation on the soldier back from the wars.

Perhaps the young man was overawed by so much fossil presence: He took his leave. When he extended his hand, I had an urge to take him round the shoulders and to give him a hug and to say: "I know. I know. War is much too beastly a thing for human beings to be in it." But one simply does not do this sort of thing. Hell knows why.

Anyhow, the spell was broken. What the boy needed now were not even the ministrations of his beloved. What he needed was a big plate of his mother's chicken soup and about thirty-six hours of the dreamless.