In the golden world

by spyglass

Summary

When Joe leaves for Europe and the Great War, Betsy learns to adjust to life at home without him.

Notes

Thanks to my wonderful beta reader, Dasha!

Title (as well as quote) from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.

Hereafter, in a better world than this,
I shall desire more love and knowledge of you.
--William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

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i.

On the morning after Lt. Joseph Willard and the rest of the 192nd Battalion departed for New
York, and then on to Europe, Betsy woke before the breakfast gong, her mind racing. Thoughts of Joe and how he looked at their farewell at the train station swirled in her head. True, he had been at Officer’s Training Camp at Fort Snelling for the past three months, but today the knowledge that he was further away than ever plagued her.

She lay in bed, warm under her blankets but still missing Joe no less, and glanced around the familiar room. Her eyes fell on the shelf that held the most precious belongings that had come from their house on Canoe Place, and with newfound determination, she rose and settled herself at Uncle Keith’s trunk. She took out her notebook and a pen, and she thought back on the morning of her wedding. At the time, that had been the most important list she had ever written.

As she called to mind the image of her dear Joe dressed smartly in his uniform, her heart overflowed with love and pride and patriotism. This time, she thought suddenly, it really will be the most important list I ever write. Now, she must put aside her own needs, and Joe’s, to support the country in the Great War.

Rules for Life While Joe is in Europe

1. *Continue working hard for the Hawthorne Publicity Bureau.* This, of course, was a given. Betsy loved her job with Mrs. Hawthorne. It brought her great comfort to work in the same office where Joe had first worked when they were married, among people who knew him and cared about him. Their many projects to support the war effort made Betsy’s heart swell with pride.

2. *Help Mamma and Anna around the house.* She realized that not every wife whose husband was off at war was as lucky as she to have her family close by. Yes, whenever she could, she must offer to help.

3. *Keep a journal faithfully so that when Joe comes home, you can tell him everything that happened.* She would not be able to write everything down in letters. Instead, she would have to settle for the next best thing. Writing would keep him close to her heart.

4. *Spend time with Margaret.* It seemed like only yesterday, she was walking her younger sister to her first day of school. Now Margaret was a senior, and next fall, she would be off to the U, just like Julia and Betsy had been. While Betsy knew she could never hope to be the older sister that Julia was, she would do her best for Margaret’s sake.

5. *Improve your cooking skills.* If you can’t learn from Mamma and Anna, then there is no hope for you. This still gave her some trouble. She would start with learning another company dinner. If that went well, she might try something more difficult. Maybe with some guidance, Anna could teach her how to make the cocoanut cake Joe loved so much. It would be a nice surprise on their first night back at their cozy home on Canoe Place.

6. *Keep up correspondence with Jean.* Cab was one of her oldest friends, and even though Jean would be in North Dakota with her family, it would probably do her well to hear from some of Cab’s friends. Betsy knew that Tacy and Tib and Carney would be more than happy to maintain correspondence with Jean as well.

7. *Stick to your budget.* There would be fewer opportunities for extravagance without Joe, and if they wanted to have Bettina when he returned, they should start saving now.

8. *Do everything you can to support the war effort.* This last one, she thought, was rather self-explanatory, but it was important to include nonetheless.
Deciding that her list was sufficient at present, Betsy looked it over carefully. Her job, she concluded, was relatively simple compared to that of the soldiers.

She memorized its contents before tearing the page from her notebook and tucking it safely in the front cover of her own well-worn copy of *As You Like It*. She then placed the book beside Joe’s identical copy and, with careful determination, made her way downstairs to help Anna with breakfast.

It would be muffins again this morning. She could almost hear Joe’s voice lightly teasing her about Ray family traditions.

The late September sun glinted high in the sky one week later as Betsy climbed up the Big Hill behind her old house. Her arms were linked with Tacy on one side and Tib on the other, much like they had done as children.

The three climbed the hill together in silence. At the top, they turned around to glance down Hill Street. Betsy studied the houses the spread out before them. From the small yellow cottage where Betsy herself had grown up to the soft light coming from the windows of the Kelly house across the street, the home where Tacy’s mother still lived with her brother Paul, how grand Hill Street had seemed when they were younger. Ahead in the distance, they could see Tib’s chocolate-colored house.

How strange it would be, Betsy thought to herself, if we had never been friends.

“I think we should see what Tacy’s mother packed for us.” It was Tib who spoke first, as she spread their blanket out underneath one of the old elm trees. Betsy and Tacy followed suit, eagerly eyeing the contents as Tib began to unpack the picnic basket.

The girls spent most of the day helping Jean pack and clean so that she could go back to North Dakota. After they finished, they stopped for coffee at Tib’s house before continuing on to Tacy’s for dinner. Upon their arrival, Mrs. Kelly handed them a full picnic basket and a red-checked blanket before shooing them out the door.

“It will be good for you,” she had said with a bright smile, “To have a picnic like when you were little girls.”

Tib piled their plates high with ham sandwiches and chicken and rolls, and Betsy laid out napkins and silverware. The three girls chattered happily as they ate. Tib beamed at praise for her new dress that she made herself using her electric sewing machine, her wedding present from Jack. Betsy recounted in great, dramatic detail her latest project at the Hawthorne Publicity Bureau. Tacy laughed gently as she told stories about her dear sons.

“Harry thinks we should have a daughter next time,” she chuckled.

Betsy beamed in response. Tacy was such a wonderful mother; she *should* have a daughter.

“You already have her first doll!” Betsy exclaimed with excitement. She had bought the doll as a gift while she was in Europe before Tacy’s first son Kelly had been born.
Tacy grinned back. “We’re not having her yet!” she protested. “I told Harry we had to wait until you both had daughters too, so that they can be friends just like we are.”

Tib frowned thoughtfully and said, “I don’t think you can plan that.”

Betsy and Tacy exchanged a quick look. It was just like Tib to say that, they thought to themselves.

“Well,” Tacy said emphatically. “Harry thinks it’s a wonderful idea, and you know how Harry is when he decides he wants something.”

All three girls collapsed in a fit of giggles, for they knew this to be the absolute truth.

The sun sunk low in the sky as the sound of children shouting and playing on Hill Street below carried up to where Betsy, Tacy and Tib sat. From their perch at the top of the Big Hill, they could see the young children play much as they had, among the trees with changing leaves that signaled the shifting of the seasons.

A few houses on the street now displayed flags proudly, notifying the rest of the world that they had husbands or sons off serving their country in the Great War. Betsy thought of Joe and wondered where he was at that very moment, and if he was thinking of her. Though she missed Joe terribly, she knew he was safe because he was with Sam and Jack and Cab and Hobbie, just like she was with Tacy and Tib.

She silently prayed that Julia’s husband Paige was as lucky as she and Joe were, to be surrounded by such dear friends.

“It’s so lovely here,” she wondered aloud, her voice alive with reverent reflection. Could it have only been four short weeks ago that she and Tacy journeyped up the hill on the morning of Tib’s wedding? It seemed impossible!

“You know, I used to think we would always be here.”

“Ja!” Tib said seriously. “But things are always changing. Think of all that we would have missed if we’d never left Deep Valley!”

“And we’re still together!” Tacy cried. “At least that will never change.”

Betsy and Tib echoed the sentiment furiously as they collected up their plates and silverware and pack everything back into the basket. They started their descent as the sun began to set behind them; they walked side by side, their arms linked.

As they made their way down Hill Street, Betsy recalled Joe’s comforting words from before he left for Fort Snelling. We’re woven together, she thought, me and Tacy and Tib! She smiled contentedly at the absolute truth of this.

The sun seemed to nod in agreement as it disappeared slowly behind them.

iii.

Life back at 909 was much the same as always, Betsy thought, climbing the stairs to her familiar blue and white room with a heavy ache in her chest. Not a week had gone by since the trip to Deep Valley, and Carney had invited Betsy, Tacy and Tib over for dinner that evening.
Tib had driven them in Jack’s Ford as she often did. Afterwards, she dropped Tacy off first, and they had come inside to spend a few minutes with Harry as he put the boys to bed. It had been late by the time Tib dropped Betsy off at 909 Hazel Street, where the lights were glowing as bright as ever. Tib had come in for some of Anna’s coffee cake, and they had all sat around the piano as Margaret played.

Now Tib had gone home and Betsy trudged upstairs to bed, loneliness tugging at her heart. Although she knew how lucky she was to have her family and friends, she still missed Joe more than ever.

As Betsy shut the door of her bedroom, she noticed a book sitting propped up against the pillows that had not been there when she left that morning. She picked up the leather-bound notebook and inspected it carefully. It was brand new, and she had never seen it before! She opened the book to its first page and drew in a breath as Joe’s familiar script appeared before her. His voice surrounded her as she read.

*My dearest Betsy,*

*I have entrusted this gift to your mother for her to give to you after my departure. I do not know where I will be as you read this, but know that wherever I am, I am sure to be missing you terribly.*

*I am leaving you this notebook so that you may begin to write your own stories when you are not too busy with the Publicity Bureau or with life at 909! By now, I am sure to have told everyone about ‘Emma Middleton Cuts Cross Country’ and I expect you to fill the pages of this notebook so that I will have plenty to boast about to my fellow officers! None of them will have an accomplished author as a wife! One day perhaps you can even tell our story.*

*Do not worry for me, my darling, for I will come out of this, and we shall be together again soon.*

*Your loving husband,*

*Joe*

Betsy felt her heart beat faster as she finished reading, and she cradled the notebook against her chest. She could feel Joe reaching out to her, even though they were apart, and she truly believed him when he said they would be together again soon. One day, she thought, she *would* tell their story, but in the meantime, she would fill the pages with the other stories that swirled around in her head.

Exhilarated, she walked over to her desk and began to write.

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