

As German As Apple Pie

By Gianna Yu

“Daddy!”

A young girl launches herself towards me. With my hands holding a suitcase and papers that aren't mine, I let her hug me without resistance. After a beat, I set my luggage on the ground and wrap an arm around her. The movement is stiff — I've never had a daughter before.

But I let the moment drag on for too long, and the girl tilts her head up, eyebrows creased. “Daddy?” her voice is softer this time. I open my mouth instinctively to reassure her that *yes, it's your Daddy* before I set my jaw. My only response is a weak smile. The girl is nervous. Not suspicious yet. And then, I hear another voice.

“Gary?” she comes closer, wrapped in a red coat. There are a few strands of white in her brown hair.

Gary. So that was how I was supposed to pronounce my name. Alone, I had tried and failed to replicate the American pronunciation — I had wrung the dog tags in front of my face as if that would better help me memorise a dead man's name. “Gary?” the woman repeats again, and I can't put it off any longer. My hand leaves my daughter's shoulder and I face my new wife, a few feet away. She doesn't come closer.

Her lipstick is strong, bolder than what's considered fashionable in Germany. She has the bluest eyes I've ever seen — other than dead Gary Doherty's. When I first spotted his body on the battlefield, he was staring at the sky with his mouth open in dead-as-a-doornail wonder. After I saw how similar our faces looked, stealing his dog tags and uniform had seemed like second nature.

I'm frozen in indecision before an arm slings across my narrow shoulders — I stumble forward a few steps. “Jane! Lord, it's been *years*. And Izzy,” the newcomer greets my daughter. He pinches her cheek before she shies away from him.

“Will,” Jane Doherty greets warmly. She finally steps forward and gives him a brisk half-hug. “I was worried sick about you.” Her eyes slide to me for a second. “About *both* of you,” she quickly

amends. “But my husband won’t even speak to me!” her joke falls flat, and I look at the ground when all eyes turn to me. Even my shoes are unfamiliar: laced and steel-capped; far too modern compared to my previous pair of utilitarian German jackboots.

“You haven’t heard, Jane?” Will’s grip on my shoulder tightens. I owe him Gary Doherty’s life, if not mine. “Poor ol’ Gary lost his voice. Right after...” he cuts a hand through the air to reference *everything*. “I found him huddled down, hands tight around his dog tag.” He gives a small chuckle, but it doesn’t reach his war-ridden eyes. *Our* war-ridden eyes — but until recently, we’d been fighting on opposite sides. “I reckon he must’a had a taste with the Lord or somethin’. Treat him well, will ya? I’m sure he’ll come ‘round eventually.” After another second, William leaves with his family — one that’s actually his.

All around us, we can hear screams of joy and heartbreak as people find their loved ones and simultaneously realise which ones are missing.

I can’t look at my wife. Instead, I pick up my daughter. Isabel stiffens slightly before she gazes at me with huge eyes. She looks gangly, like a young sprout. She can’t be any older than ten, if eleven. I wonder what she remembers of her father. We walk home like one happy family. People embrace and kiss in the street, but I look away. Jane touches my arm, softly. “Honey.” I set Isabel down and let her skip down the sidewalk.

At home, the first thing I see is a newspaper on the table.

WAR ENDS IN EUROPE

ALLIED SOLDIERS COME HOME

My throat is dry. I glance around furtively. Isabel tries to be discreet, but her eyes follow me as I unbutton my coat and take off my hat. I nod, once, but that alone can’t convey the emotion a man *should* show towards his family. Almost impulsively, I put out my arms and Isabel goes towards me reluctantly. I kneel and hug her tightly, and I pretend not to be hurt when she wriggles out of my grasp.

“I made apple pie, Gary.” Jane reappears from the kitchen with a small plate. “Your favourite.”

A week goes by.

I can't do it.

My silence kills me. I see my wife's eyes, her distance.

Jane sleeps in another room. She knows who I am. Or at least, who I'm *not*.

Isabel doesn't, yet. After school, she talks to me. She talks about her classmates, who she likes, who she dislikes, and even who she hates. I even let out a small laugh when she tells me about a classmate slipping in the hallway. At the same time that her eyes light up, I clap a hand over my mouth.

She doesn't understand.

On a Sunday after Church, I tap Jane's shoulder. She stiffens. I gesture to the table and she sits slowly, and only after I do. Isabel is out playing with the neighbour's children.

"Es tut mir leid." I cough, before I continue. "I'm sorry." My voice is croaky and unsure after so long, but it doesn't matter. As soon as Jane Doherty hears my German-tinged accent, the blood drains from her face. "You can call the authorities. The officers." I lace my hands together in front of me. It doesn't matter that I'm alive for now, doesn't matter that I'm on American soil. I was never meant to outrun my crimes. Suddenly, I feel very stupid and foolish for going through all the extra trouble to pose as Gary Doherty.

"I'm sorry," I say again. I watch with tired eyes as Mrs. Doherty abruptly stands and flees, her heels click-clacking on the floor. I close my eyes.

At this moment, I wish for a slice of apple pie.