

Words Left Unsaid

a *The Bridges at Toko-Ri* fanfic

by Rodo

for *ifiwereabell*

Dear ~~Mrs Brubaker~~ Nancy,

I am writing to you today to express my heartfelt condolences regarding the death of your husband. He was one of the best men to serve on the Savo Island, one of the best I've known, and his loss was felt deeply by his entire squadron, as well as myself. I hope you can take solace in the fact that you are not alone in your grief and that your husband will never be forgotten. In the end, it was not those damned bridges that got him—

The letter glared back at Admiral George Tarrant. Some words couldn't capture what they were supposed to convey. They could only ever feel like empty husks, mere echoes of good intentions when staring back at you from the page. It was a dilemma that he was only too familiar with. Letters of condolence, important though they were, felt like bile stuck in his throat, always. But this one was worse than most. For days, it taunted him from its perch on his desk, poisoning the atmosphere in his cabin until he tossed it in the trash. He promised himself he'd find better words eventually, but eventually never came.

Still, the memory of Harry Brubaker and his vibrant young wife remained a constant pressure behind George Tarrant's eyes.



George Tarrant recognized the tall, straight back and elegant figure before he got close enough to read the words on the gravestone before her. At first, surprise hit him like a brick. He hadn't expected to run into her and that abandoned letter still weighed on his conscience. But he was a soldier through and through, so he squared his shoulders and stepped forward, despite it all. In the distance, he saw two little girls running and playing, their ruffled black dresses a stark contrast to their bright laughter. He turned his eyes to

the smooth, white stone: Harry Brubaker, died in Korea, barely past thirty. It was a cenotaph, of course. They'd never been able to recover the bodies. For a moment, he wondered what had happened to them. Had they just been left to rot? Or had those commies chucked them in a pit and forgotten about them? Brubaker, Forney and Gamidge had deserved better – so many men had.

“Oh, I’m sorry, my mind was somewhere else and I didn’t see you there— Admiral?”

“Mrs Brubaker— Nancy,” George Tarrant corrected himself taking off his hat and nodding at her in greeting. She looked... well. Not a hair was out of place, her mourning dress impeccably ironed, her face as fresh as he remembered. But underneath all that, he could sense a bottomless sadness he was only too familiar with. It showed in the tense shadows around her eyes and the stiff way she held herself. Loss pervaded every aspect of her being.

“I wanted to pay my respects,” he told her, turning to the grave. An empty gesture, but that was all that was left to both of them. Better than nothing at all.

“Thank you,” he heard her say. His eyes were fixed on the engraved letters. “It is good to know that I’m not the only one who remembers. The only one who...”

In the distance, a girl screeched as another chased her around a tree. George watched Nancy’s eyes turn to her two daughters and mist over. A stark contrast: life went on, while the field of graves lay silent and withered, as the dead were slowly fading from memory.

“I should be glad they’re young,” Nancy told him. “Oh, those first days were terrible, Susie would barely eat and Kathy kept crying, but now they thrive. Harry would be so proud of them and their resilience. If only he were here to see them.”

“I believe he is,” George told her.

He earned himself a tired smile in response. He wished he could do more – and suddenly, with astonishing clarity, he knew that he had to. He had failed his sons, his wife and his daughter-in-law. He couldn’t fail Harry too. “And I hope you can take solace in the fact that you are not the only one who misses him. You do not have to be alone in that.” He hoped Harry Brubaker could see that as well.

“Thank you,” she replied. She still bore the weight of the world on her shoulders, but her frame seemed a little less brittle. There was hope yet, even if the darkness was still lingering at her back. And George Tarrant would be there to see her through it, in whatever way he could, even if he was stuck halfway around the world for a good part of the year.



—of course, she's no Myra Hess – yet – but it honestly doesn't matter to me. I had a wonderful time, even when she hit the wrong keys and couldn't quite spread her fingers wide enough to reach some of them. And Kathy loved it too. Her first piano recital, just the simplest of songs, but she was the center of attention and soaked it up like a sponge. I was so happy all evening until I got home and put the girls to bed. I turned to tell Harry about my day before I knew it, before remembering that he's no longer here. I froze when I did, and everything came back to me, all the grief and sadness that I've been fighting so hard. Do you have days like that too? Where you forget that George is dead for a moment, only to be thrust back into reality? Oh, how I hate myself sometimes—



The dishes were piling up in the sink, ready to be put into the brand-new electric dishwasher that Nancy had written to him about two months ago. It stood there, a gaping, empty maw waiting to be fed plates and glasses, while Nancy grabbed the countertop as if her life depended on it. The guests were chatting in the living room, and beyond it, in the garden. It had been a perfect day. The weather was warm and pleasant and a slight breeze was ruffling the leaves. A perfect day. At least that's what it had looked like on the surface. George Tarrant knew better, had known better since the moment he'd arrived. Something had been off with Nancy, even if the neighbors and friends hadn't seen it. He'd gone looking for her when things had turned quiet around him, and he had found her: a perfect facade clad in pink taffeta, about to crumble. It would have been Harry's birthday, but everybody had forgotten about it. Everybody but them. Nancy and the girls had paid him a visit in the morning and put some flowers on his grave, while George had come to Denver to lend his support.

He put a hand on her shoulder, lacking words of comfort as he was. He wanted to tell her that it would get better, but those words felt like a lie. The only thing he could promise Nancy was that he would be there for her, for as long as God allowed him to be, and that you could bear it if you were determined to.

"I don't know if I can do it anymore," she whispered as if she were standing in a confessional, baring the most private parts of her soul and shattering into a thousand pieces. For a moment, she looked relieved – at least she'd been able to admit it, George reckoned.

"You can," he promised her. "You're strong. Stronger than most women I have known in my life. You've got two wonderful girls and a whole life ahead of you. This day will pass and there will be other, better ones."

Silent cries began to shake her delicate frame and tears started rolling down her cheeks, ruining her foundation, but she didn't make a sound. Afraid to upset the damned guests. George didn't know why the party had had to be scheduled on this very day precisely – the explanation had been long-winded and too complex for his straightforward mind – but Nancy had written to him that she'd felt unable to decline. He patted her shoulder and let her cry.

“My parents don't understand why I haven't started looking for a new man.”

The sentence lay heavy between them, as heavy as the grief. “They only want the best for you,” George assured her. He'd been a father too, once. He wished his daughter-in-law could have found another man to replace George as well, sometimes. It was preferable to what had become of her.

“I can't, though. I can't forget Harry. I'll love him until the end of my days, I know it,” Nancy declared with a force that finally allowed her to let go of the countertop and turn to him. George's hand fell to his side. There was a fire in her eyes that lit another in his heart.

“Then don't. But you've got so much yet to live for. Your daughters, your home, friends, travel... hell, I hear these days, some widows even find themselves jobs, even if more out of necessity than anything. And you have friends. I care for you very much, you know? I was never blessed with a daughter, but if I had been, I would want her to be like you, strong and fierce,” George told her. Over the months, visits and letters she had become so close to him that his heart ached more for her than it did for Harry and his early grave – painful though it was to admit to himself. He'd never tell her. That truth was one he'd take to his grave. “And when you do see Harry again, he'll be thrilled to hear all about your adventures, I'm sure.”

Nancy laughed bitterly. “I know. It's as if I'm trying to walk, but I keep falling. Everyone keeps telling me that I should be over it, or at least have become accustomed to the loss, but I'm not. I just... don't even know where to start, I suppose.”

“Then let me help you. But first, you've got some guests to entertain, don't you? Let's do our best to muddle through that mess first, then we'll see.”

She laughed again, it was a small one, but this time, it was genuine. With one shake of her head, she attempted to rid herself of her malaise and composed herself. George offered her his arm. She took it without hesitation. The laughter of the guests wafted back into his awareness, as did the drying tears on her cheeks.

“You might want to powder your nose first, though,” he pointed out.

Nancy reached for her face before stopping just short of touching the streaks in her make-up. Then she sighed. It was one of those sighs that spoke of just how tired she was,

but her desperation seemed to have leached away. The pain was still there, but it seemed bearable. She went off to the bathroom and appeared minutes later, once again the picture of a perfect hostess. Nancy would get there, George knew. On days like these she'd stumble, but she'd get up again, for her children and herself. And if she needed more encouragement than her own heart could provide, he'd be happy to help her up.

"I'll be with you every step of the way," he promised, offering his arm again.

"I'll hold you to that," she told him, a slight twinkle in her eyes.



—he says I'm quite something – just like you. Some of the other legal secretaries think we'll end up marrying within the year, but you and I both know that won't happen. Richard knows it too. He was a friend of Harry's once, I think that's why he gave me a chance more than anything. I'm just glad to have proved myself worthy of his trust. And worthy of your confidence in me. I would never have asked him if you hadn't suggested it, and you were right—



When Admiral George Tarrant returned home, the house was cloaked in darkness. He found his wife where he expected her to be: in the living room, staring at something in the distance and looking at nothing. It was too dark to see anything anyway. In her lap lay half a sweater and a ball of yarn. She blinked when he flicked on the light. Aged beyond her years, with hair more gray than brown, she was still beautiful to him.

"It's time to go to bed, don't you think Margaret?"

His wife blinked and put her knitting away. Then she started to shuffle off as if they were strangers. Two sons between them, but without them, nothing seemed to tether them to each other. George was getting sick of it.

"I still love you," he told her. He'd advised Nancy to be proactive and change her life for the better and it seemed to have worked for her. Maybe it was time he took his own advice.

Margaret froze, then turned. For a moment, he saw the woman he'd met forty years earlier, bright and full of laughter. Then she shrank in on her current self. "Well," she told him. "Are you going to stay this time, then?"

George sighed, thinking of the *Savo Island*, currently anchored at Yokosuka and awaiting his return. One last turn. “No. But soon, I promise. And when I do, I want to introduce you to someone.”

Fin