

# The Last Slice of Bread

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In this age when the flames of war swirled all over this peaceful land and plague spreaded wantonly, maybe only kindness can eternally live on everyone's heart like diamonds.

Shirley was a herbalist doctor in a town which each of them called it "Kind". She was forties with brown hair and few wrinkles on her face. She looked slim and fragile, but nobody could deny the fact that she was a strong woman whatever in her mind or in her body. Today was September 10<sup>th</sup> 1864. It was her son Allen's 18-year-old birthday, but it was also the day Allen joined the Union Army fighting for his state. Allen's father was murdered by the plague several months later when Allen first saw the light. Maybe it was Shirley's prayer. She and Allen lived safe and sound in this town even if they were not rich. However, god doesn't always bless and protect people, especially when they are 18 years old in war's age.

Shirley made a really big feast which Allen had never ever enjoyed for lunch. In fact, the feast was made of a small bowl of mashed potato, two pieces of Bacon(one and a half was given to Allen, the other half was eaten by Shirley), two sweet corns and some nuts that Allen liked. Of course, they had a large piece of cake without cream. Well, actually there was a little cream on it. Shirley always said to Allen that cream is as precious as life, but Allen didn't think so. She did get these cream by using a lamb. She knew that it was not worthy. But when she imagined his smiling face, she'd like to give up her life. You may only be a person in this world. But for someone, you're the world. Allen is her whole world. She loves him.

"Oh my god! Mom, this is really the best and incredible thing in my life!" Allen swallowed and said, and the cake's crumbs were all around his mouth.

"Slow down my boy, you get a lot." Shirley said satisfactorily.

"Well, mom, where did you get these cream? You always say that cream is more expensive than life, don't you?" Allen wiped his mouth and asked.

"No, I don't. You may live luckily all the time, but you may not taste what is the cream like in such ages." Shirley answered.

"Oh, please wait a minute." Shirley stopped peeling the nuts for him, wiped her hands on the apron, walked into the room, and took a small blank box from the drawer gingerly.

"Mom, what is that? It looks sucks." Allen curled his lip and asked.

"Hey boy, watch your mouth!" Shirley said. "Open it, you'll find out." she added.

"Wow! That is so cool! Thanks mom, that is what I want all the time. Where is it from?" Allen

stood up and asked excitedly.

It is a somewhat faded gold pocket watch. Even if it faded, you still could see that it used to be as dazzling as the sun.

“Open it.” Shirley’s voice sounded muffled, as if she was remembering something she didn’t like.

“That is... That is ...dad?” Allen asked tensely and his head sweated a lot.

“Yes, he was, my sweetheart.” Shirley responded with eyes full of tears.

Since Allen’s father died, Shirley had brought him up by herself. Nevertheless, he couldn’t escape the life in the army when he finally grew up. No one knew that Shirley suffered a lot. But compared with Shirley’s sadness, Allen was excited. First, eventually he grew up a real tough man and he could take good care of Shirley. Second, eventually he could join the Union Army, fight for his state and be a useful person. Last but not least, it was the first time for him to see his father’s appearance. His father was the most famous doctor in his town. People honored him, respected him, but nobody thought that someday he would be killed by himself—he couldn’t find a way to cure the plague. However, the worst thing was that his body was burnt to ashes in order to prevent the plague.

“You can’t have it all.” Shirley always mutters that.

“Your farther sent this pocket watch to me before he died and he said that I need to give it to you when you’re 18 years old as a gift. Listen, honey, he was sorry for what he couldn’t do for you, but you should know that he loves you as I love. Please don’t blame to him, and promise me you will come back safely.” Shirley began to sniffle.

“I will, mom. Don’t worry about me. Take care of yourself, I’ll be back soon.” Allen held on her in arms and said.

Fortune has not always smiled upon people. The mayor came to Shirley with a bunch of mum and told her that her son was killed by Confederacy in a forest which was not far from a town named Konbro when Allen joined the Union 13 days later. Everyone was dead including the enemies. The news soon spread over the whole town. Everybody wanted to visit her and comfort her. However, when they knocked on her door, no one answered. They knew that she was looking for her son, but they didn’t know whether she would come back someday.

People who lived in Konbro found her at the gate of the town. She almost fainted on the ground, ragged, half-starved and exhausted when people got her. With the help of them, she recovered finally. Then they told her that she couldn’t reach that forest, because it was contaminated by radiation—the warring sides used weapons with radiation. That was also the reason why no survivors in that fight and no body was taken back. Obviously, Shirley wouldn’t listen to them. She had already made that hard decision, she wouldn’t stop until she found her son Allen. Ultimately, people in the town offered her some food and equipments (a lot of slices of

bread, a big bottle of water, a blanket, a knife and a lighter)to help her. They also told her that these things would be run out a month later, and if she didn't come back, they would ask searchers for help. Shirley could do nothing but thank. Then she was on her way.

After three days of hard work, Shirley found her son in the forest. Exactly, it was his cold body. He was ragged and curled on the earth with a pained look just like a puppy which was having a nightmare. Shirley wiped her tears away and came close to him. But when she was ready to touch him, there was a sound came into her ears from a bush. That sounded like a snake was giving a hiss and that hissing got on her nerves. She was astonished a lot, because there should be no one here. She still made up her mind to have a look after a few minutes of thinking, even if she was scared. She walked step by step and pushed the bush aside cautiously.

"Jesus!" Shirley screamed abruptly.

"my son, what happened to you?!" Shirley found a black boy who wore the Union's uniform. It was not weird that black people appeared in the Union, because Abraham Lincoln decided to recruit them after he announced the Emancipation Proclamation.

That boy was too weak to speak even one word. When life and death showed up together, she made a difficult choice to pick up the life.

"Death is death. I can't give up you, but at the same time I can't let a fresh life go in front of me. I'm sorry, and I know you will choose the same way like I do." Shirley buried her son Allen finally with tears dropping on the ground.

Shirley prepared to get out of the forest with the black boy. But the young boy was too strong and she couldn't take him walking quickly. Don't forget she is forties. One day morning, as they moved out by degrees, the forest was dense with fog. They had no choice but found a place to get rid of it. Fortunately, Shirley discovered a cave by accident, and they settled down there for now. However, when the fog was gone, she found that they were lost. Then she had to decide to live in the cave and waited for searchers. Days passed, and the boy started to rally—the situation about radiation was not as bad as they thought actually. So Shirley used her medical skills to gather herbs treating him. he made it in the end.

"h...hi..., I, uh, am Dylan. Than...thanks for helping me." he was still too undynamic to say something.

"Hey, you wake up! I'm Shirley. You need more rest. Stop talking and drink it." Shirley helped him up and took some water for him.

"Where are you from, boy? You sound like a Southerner." Shirley was a little hesitant, but she still asked.

"I, uh, I am from the North. What's wrong?" Dylan answered.

"Never mind, forget it! I'll go and find something to eat, my food is not enough for both of us, especially you're a young man." Shirley suddenly stood up and went out.

One day, when Shirley went back to the cave, she saw that Dylan was sitting above her blanket and rubbing something glittering.

“That is definitely the pocket watch I gave to my son! You are a damn liar!” Shirley shouted and rushed to Dylan.

“Give it to me, now! It doesn’t belong to you! Who are you and why are you lying to me!”, Shirley was out of control. She flipped her wig about what he had done.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have lied to you. But...” Dylan tried to explain something, but Shirley didn’t give him a chance.

“Beat it! That’s enough!” She cried.

In fact, Dylan was one of the Confederacy. He got shot and fainted, but not dead. When he woke up, he saw that everyone had already died. He thought that this place belonged to the North, so if somebody came up to help, it was better that he wore the Union’s uniform than wore the Confederacy’s. Thereupon, he took off Allen’s clothes and put them up. But he was too injured to move. He had to stay where he was, and when he couldn’t persist, Shirley appeared just in time and saved his life.

When Shirley heard all the things he said, she wept bitterly. What she had done! She should buried her son with her own hands and chose to save an enemy! She would never forgive herself! Shirley held the knife that others gave to her, approaching Dylan step by step, as if she was the god who is the just judge.

“Please, don’t kill me..., I have family. my parents, borthers and sisters are waiting for me. I don’t have a choice, I have to do this, or the owners and government will murder my parents! I need to protect and take care of them. I need to go back. Please.....” Dylan begged her. he was afraid of that shining knife badly that maybe stab his heart next second.

Shirley’s mind began to waver, she suddenly forgot what she was doing. She just recalled the day when Allen left home, and she remembered that he was smiling to her with full of mouth’s cream. Perhaps Life is a path winding in the mountain, bumpy and zigzagging.

Shirley just stood there with nothing to do and after a long time she said:“....., I won’t kill you right now, but you’ll be punished in front of my whole town’s people once we get out of here!”. Then she tied up Dylan’s hands and feet by vines she found around the cave.

When the thirtieth day came, their food was almost exhausted.

“Here! We only have two pieces of bread. We eat all the stuff which didn’t get irradiated. This is for you! Eat it up, then all the things we can do is praying.” Shirley said without a tone.

“You’re stronger and younger than me, if you were alive, can you promise me one thing?” Shirley added after a second.

“.....,If, if I’m saved. Say it.” Dylan was a little bit surprised, he frowned and wondered why she

said so and said to a black people who was also an enemy.

“Would you please bury me with my son Allen, you know him, don’t you?” Shirley spoke in a soft voice, as if she were confiding her dear son

“Copy that.” Dylan responded with a breath.

Then Shirley said that she needed some fresh air at last time and climbed to the mouth of the cave, Leaving Dylan stayed inside..... When the searchers got them finally, Shirley had already dead. But fortunately enough, Dylan survived.

Few months later, Dylan had fully recovered, but he would never fight as a warrior because of the sequela. Eventually, he knew the truth that there was only one slice of bread actually, he exactly took that one, and the reason why Shirley crawled outside was that searchers could find them easily. In fact, Shirley had forgiven him in the end. Wars are brutal, but men have love.

After several years, the Civil War was ended. Dylan was married and had his own babies. His parents were also naturally old to the heaven. Of course, he kept his promise that he buried Shirley with her son Allen, and also with his parents. He told the babies a story about “The Last Slice of Bread”. Maybe they couldn’t understand it yet, but they would one day.

Perhaps the value of war lies not in the amount of land we gain, the amount of resources we plundered, but in the beauty and value of each other in our hearts.