

The Things We Sleep On

Roanne O'Neil

“Camping?” said the Gunner’s wife. There, she’d said it. After all the fuss, it had come straight out, barely a cough of a word.

“No,” was all he said.

She looked down at the table: another night with the smell of hot soup and looking into the face of Fred.

“Back in Monte Cassino,” he began.

You pitched your tent.

“I pitched my tent.”

In a blizzard, the ground so hard it bent the tent pegs.

“In a blizzard,” he said and he talked of raw skin against the guide rope. His story started the tiny throb in that vein on his temple. “A dark night.”

Steam rose from his soup bowl.

Black as smoke.

“Black as smoke. What chance did we have? We couldn’t see what it was.” He let go of his spoon and looked up. “Right there, all night, and us, just sleeping. Stones. I thought it was stones iced-up beneath the groundsheet.”

The soup would be getting cold soon. And she’d still to hear of the cuff he saw first, *the fingers, and the fistful of earth, all frozen.*

“Only in the morning,” he said, “did I learn I’d slept on a German.”

Dead.

“Dead.” He tapped the table.

“Of course,” she said. She reached for the pot and topped up his cooling soup bowl. “We’ll go to Aunt Ida’s instead.”

“Camping,” he said and shook his head at his dinner.

That night, with Fred breathing a smoker’s snore upstairs, she took out her list, “Things I must not do”:

- Wake him when he sits up in his sleep

- Clean windows—never touch his traps on the catches
- Start the car without giving him notice
- Start the radio
- Use washing powder (looks like something used by the Germans)
- Comment on the whiskey

She added “Mention camping” and there was a sound. She looked up to the ceiling. The moan of their bed frame. It must be that time now. She twice-folded the note. Held it in her own thin hand. Then tucked it into her nightshirt, where it buttoned up at her breast and where she knew he would not look for it.

