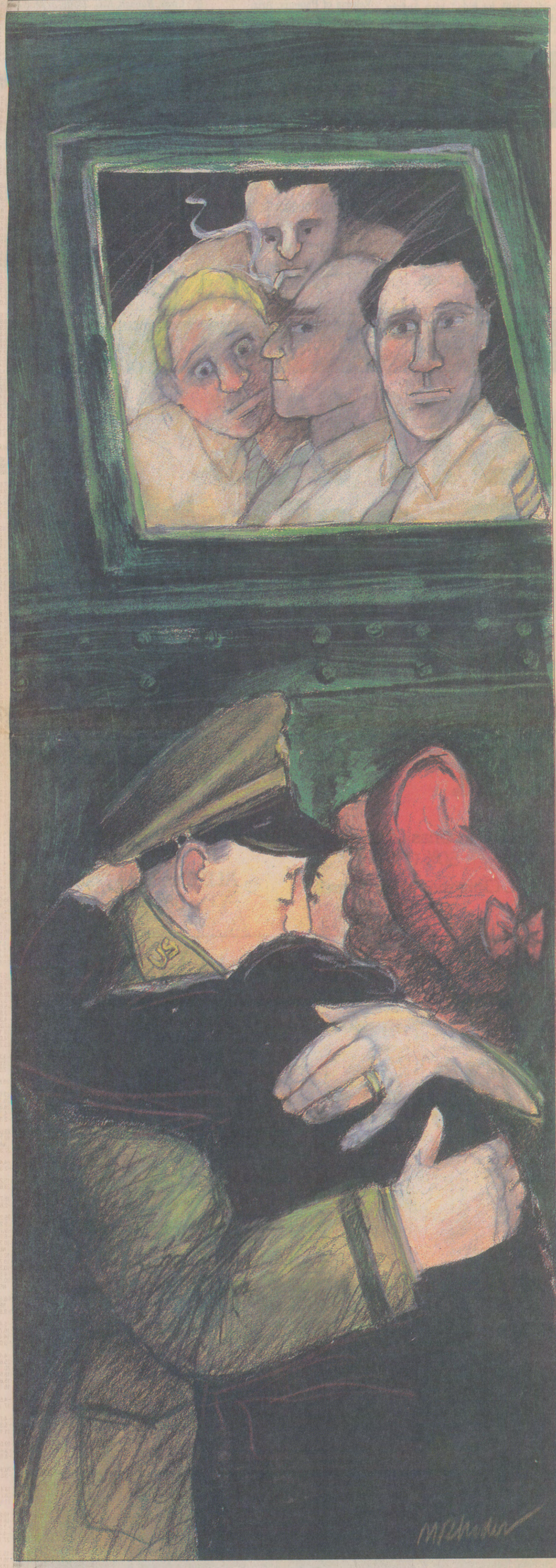
Flair

CHILD LIFE D2
MORE LIGHTS D4
TELEVISION D6

CHRISTMAS MEMORIES D4
Scent of cedar summons childhood



MARTIN RHODES/TIMES-DISPATCH

Time enough to love

A FICTIONAL TALE BY LEE GRAVES
BASED ON A TRUE STORY

The troop train lurched, jostling Ben from his half-sleep.

"What now?" a man groaned.

Ben didn't recognize the voice, but he heard the boredom, fatigue and anxiety that had become as familiar as his olive drabs.

Ben opened one eye to see if he could trace the voice. He couldn't. He hardly knew anybody. The train was a "civilian," loaded with GIs from various units headed in various directions. Strangers, although nobody was really a stranger. They were all in this together. Besides, one look at a man's uniform, and you knew whom he was with and where he'd been; one look at his face and you knew what he'd seen.

Like Jennings across the aisle. When Ben had come aboard in the early morning darkness an hour ago and picked his way between the seats, he'd accidentally bumped the man with his duffel bag. Jennings had started at first, then eased up to help Ben stow his gear. He was a dark, angular man with high cheekbones, gleaming hair and a rock-solid handshake. His hardware told a story: Purple Heart, Bronze Star with oak leaf cluster, second lieutenant, and on his patch was the faceless crimson silhouette of the Red Bull of the Iowa 34th. He'd been in North Africa, Ben learned in their brief chat, and it was easy to tell he'd seen some tough times.

Who hadn't? Everybody had made sacrifices, little ones, big ones. The little ones — rationing, loneliness — you could cope with. The big ones — losing a buddy, a husband, a son — well, you coped as best you could. Some were too big. Ben had his own fenced-off area where he refused to let his mind dwell. Maybe someday he would be able to come to terms with it. Maybe not. Some were too big.

Ben closed his eye and tried to get comfortable. He was weary, weary of war. Things had been looking swell until the Germans punched a bulge in Belgium 10 days ago, and now all the GIs were jittery that their momentum had hit a stumbling block. Still, duty called, and Ben and his buddies weren't about to ease up.

The train braked again, harder. Ben yawned and reluctantly blinked awake. He had wanted to nestle back into the warm cocoon of memories from 45 days at home. The images were sharp — Mary by his side on the piano bench as she played "What Child Is This?" and "Joy to the World," eating vegetables she had canned from their "victory garden" last summer, reveling in the incredibly soft warmth of their bed. And holding Bud on his lap, telling stories about the squalor in North Africa and bombed-out villas in Italy. The feel of the boy's bristly black hair and the constant tugging on Ben's trousers were little treasures.

He grinned inside at one memory. Mary had gone to great trouble to find various nuts, spices, raisins and dates to make him fruitcake. She'd forgotten he'd hated it, but there it sat for days as he worked away, bit by bit, putting pieces into a napkin and stuffing them into his pocket until he could sneak them into the trash. She never knew.

What a wife. For 26 months, he'd devoured each letter, each V-mail. And as much as he tried to keep details clear, some things had faded. Like how her voice could go from a murky whisper to a mischievous giggle in just two breaths. Like how her eyes could be so wide and open and honest that you couldn't help but be drawn in. It was like taking a step into an endless garden with roses and tulips and fountains and benches, and you could either sit and rest or explore wherever the path would lead; you would never be lost, but there was always the mystery of what was just beyond that curve.

The letters had conveyed only a smidgen of the hardships at home. Everybody did without. Gas, rubber, scrap metal, fresh meat, fruit, sugar — he would never take these for granted again. And there were so many women, lonely and anxious about their men. The worry and wondering were a constant weight. They yearned for news, yet they feared it as well. Yet how strong and determined and proud they were. Mary had been breathlessly eager to show him off, ushering him around to flag-raisings and socials. This was her man, and they were together, safe and sound, at least for the time being.

Ben snapped out of his daydreaming as the train braked again and wheezed toward its stop. A tall man two seats away hurriedly got up. He was wearing his dress pinks, an odd choice for a train trip in winter. Ben could tell by the marks on the sleeve that the man, a major, had been overseas three years. The Signal Corps insignia gave another clue, and there was a bluish-white patch Ben couldn't place.

The major bustled down the aisle, and Ben looked outside, searching for a rose of sunlight in the gray dawn. The gentle hills of northern Virginia were easing by, and he glimpsed a sign saying "Burke." As the train shuddered to a stop, he noticed a black Buick angled in the gravel like a shadow, and a woman holding a bundle stood between the car and Ben's window.

"Hey, it's a dame!" said Jerry, leaning into Ben. Jerry Pratt was a blond, red-faced sergeant, a Kansas native and Anzio veteran whom Ben had met just an hour ago. He was in the seat between Ben and a quiet, hollow-eyed Marine corporal named Al Schneider.

"She's got a kid," said another soldier two rows up.

"Got a D.C. license plate," said another. The finger he was pointing with was half missing. "They must've really saved up their ration tickets to get gas."

"She's all dolled up."

Indeed. She wore a red velvet hat with a petite bow in the back. Earrings glittered beneath the curls of brown hair that fell onto her black wool coat.

"Does she have on stockings?"

"Impossible. There ain't a woman in the United States of USA who could find ... "

Before that was settled, the major in dress pinks descended from the train and rushed into the woman's arms. It was a desperate, fierce embrace, more intense than many Ben had seen as worried women clutched their men.

"Look at that. What's the deal?" asked Jerry. "This ain't a regular stop."

"That's Major Whitby," said Jennings, who had gotten up and was leaning against Schneider's seat. He pulled out his Zippo, lit a Camel and continued. "I was up front. I heard Major Whitby talking to the engineer. Said he'd been stationed in Iceland with the Signal Corps since '42. Never been home." He took a drag on the cigarette. "Said he's been reassigned to the Pacific, probably to work on Signal Corps preparations for invading Japan. Scheduled to leave from Texas. Anyway, he gave the engineer some papers and told him he'd arranged for his wife to meet him here. Said it's the only chance they'd get to see each other before he ships out again."

The rustling and yawning in the car stopped.

"Holy cow," somebody muttered. "He hasn't seen her since '42?"

Jerry smiled. "Just think. In half an hour, he'll be home eating those fresh ..."

"You don't understand," Jennings interrupted, blowing out smoke harshly. "He's got to get right back on the train."

"What?"

"You're joking!"

Jennings looked down, shook his head wearily and flicked off some ashes. "Five minutes. That's all they got. Just five minutes. The engineer said he'd have to leave after five minutes."

Every neck in the car craned for a view. Some of the GIs who couldn't see moved closer, but they didn't press up to the windows to gawk. This was a private moment. Ben thought of the time he'd seen a woman breast-feeding in Italy — he knew he shouldn't watch, but it was so beautiful and tender he couldn't resist.

"Jeez. What do you say in five minutes?"

Ben watched them. Right now they weren't saying anything, just embracing again. The child — a girl with a blue wool cap that tied beneath the chin — buried her head against her mother's shoulder. Whitby freed an arm and reached out to the girl, but she shied away. From inside his trenchcoat he pulled a brown teddy bear, and that did the trick. She reached for the bear and her father in one motion.

"Awwwwwww," Jerry whispered. "Y'know, I got one at home I've never seen."

Ben remembered the teddy bear — a gray one — he'd had ready for the first time he met Bud. For 26 months — through the pregnancy, through the birth, through the

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TOMORROW IN WEEKEND: RESTAURANT REVIEWER JODY RATHGEB HANDS OUT HER WATCHFUL WAITER AWARDS