

The Home Front

The farmer and his wife pulled their chairs in front of the fireplace for warmth. The flickering firelight provided scant illumination to the darkened room behind them.

“Remember when the kids gave us that machine that made one cup of coffee at a time?” the farmer asked.

“I can barely remember coffee,” his wife grumbled.

“We didn’t know how good we had it,” the farmer continued. “I used to make a steaming cup of coffee, get into my air-conditioned tractor, and farm hundreds of acres. I was feeding the world! Now I’m limited to a rake and a hoe and I can barely grow enough to feed ourselves.”

“Things were better before the war,” his wife said. They sat in silence for a long time. Then she asked, “Think the war’s still going on?”

“Probably,” the farmer answered. “If the war was over things woulda changed. Maybe for the better and maybe for the worse, depending on who won, but they woulda changed.”

“I tried to listen to the news on the battery radio today,” his wife said, “but I couldn’t pick up nothin’.”

“The soldiers who came through a few months ago said the enemy used some sorta high altitude thing that fried all the electronics. That’s why the radio don’t work. And that’s why my tractor don’t start.”

His wife looked at her hand, rubbed it on her jeans, and looked at it again. “I wish them soldiers left us our livestock. I’d make soap.”

“I begged ‘em to at least leave us breeding stock,” the farmer said, “but soldiers don’t think about next year. They just think about the next battle. They always think the next battle will win the war and everything will be OK. That’s why they draft farmers. Or talk ‘em into enlisting like our kids did.”

“Think the kids are OK?” his wife asked. “We haven’t heard from them since they left for boot camp.”

“How could we hear from them?” the farmer asked. “No phone service, no Internet, and no mail delivery. They’re probably all right. Soldiers on the front line got it rough during a battle, but for every soldier in the front line there’s probably a dozen or more behind the lines that ain’t fightin’. And most of the time there ain’t no battles. Especially when both sides been fightin’ for a while. They’re wore out and out of ammunition.”

“I haven’t seen a plane fly over in nearly a year,” his wife said.

“They got no fuel,” the farmer said. “Same as us.”

“I thought we had lots of oil,” his wife argued.

“We got oil,” the farmer said. “But oil don’t do you no good when you ain’t got power to pump it, or refineries to turn it into fuel. The power stations and the refineries were targets on day one.”

They sat and stared at the fire for a long time. Finally, the farmer stood up and began putting on his overcoat.

“I ‘spose it’s about time for me to spell your dad in the fields,” he said. He zipped up his coat and then picked up a shotgun.

“Don’t seem right having to guard our fields all the time,” his wife said.

“It ain’t right,” the farmer replied. “It ain’t right at all. But the folks in town are starving. I’d gladly let ‘em farm the land we ain’t using, but when you’re starving you don’t want to farm. You want to eat right now. And if we let them eat the food we’re growing we won’t have anything to see us through the winter. Then we’d all starve. At least this way somebody gets to live.”

He put on his hat and walked out the door. His wife stared at the fire for a while. Then she said to no one in particular, “Sometimes I think we’ve lived too long already.”