

COREOPSIS

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Daniel Gray's wife Corrie didn't belong in our town. We all knew that on the day Dan brought her home from the city.

It wasn't just the colors she wore. We Allensville wives wore plain waists and dark skirts to Ladies Aid, and on Sundays we pinned simple straw hats to our hair, but our best dresses were jewel-colored silks and our favorite bonnets glowed with ribbon. Corrie Gray flared into town one spring morning in a dress as bright as sunflowers. "My father named me Coreopsis," she told us. "I have to live up to it."

If she had laughed then, or blushed. Most of us hadn't worn yellow since we turned thirteen, so we would have classed her as young and thoughtless, *she'll settle down when Dan gives her a baby*. But she stood tall at Dan's side, her dark head level with his blond one, and when she smiled – she, no older than any of us – it said, *I've seen more than you can imagine*.

She wasn't one of us. When we walked past her house, sometimes we heard her singing. The strange, sweet tunes tugged at us, as if they wanted to take us by the hand and draw us into a place outside the world, so we stopped up our ears. We saw Dan in his hardware store, where he carried himself like a man with a good-luck charm in his hand. *Good old Dan*, we told each other, *I'm glad he's happy*, but on Sunday mornings at church, we didn't trade nods with his wife.

We Allensville wives, good women to our good husbands, waited for life to glide back over Dan and his bride and go on the way it had before. Tomorrow, we thought, should always look just like today.

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President Wilson had promised us the war in Europe was none of our business. We believed him right up until the day, a month after Dan brought his wife home, when our men left for France.

We women had our housekeeping and our children. We would manage, we told our husbands, lifting our chins proudly to offer our goodbye kisses. To each other, we insisted our men would be back before we knew it! We held our spines stiff to hide how our bodies wanted to curl around our breaking hearts.

At first, none of us had room for anything but herself. Each of us lived out her days, setting bread to rise, visiting the market, pretending empty chat when she saw her neighbors. We fed and bathed our children and tucked them in bed at night with a kiss. We paced between the walls of our too-empty houses. Then one afternoon, Mildred Davis and Anna Wright saw Corrie Gray working in her husband's hardware store.

"Well, I never," Mildred said.

"Flies in the face of decency," Anna agreed.

Mildred and Anna stood on the far side of the street and watched Corrie through the store's plate-glass window. Later, in Anna's kitchen, we all heard how Corrie had sat at the counter, under the rack of pitchforks and shovels. She wore a primrose-yellow dress and had Dan's price book at her elbow. She was knitting, Mildred said. Something in khaki wool; it looked like a sweater. Her needles clicked along as if she'd worked them since birth. And her face, Anna said: "It was the strangest thing. Like a picture-book saint at prayer."

We raised our eyebrows. *Some saint. Why doesn't she hire a boy for the store?*

Respectable women didn't try to do their husbands' jobs. Poor Dan would be ashamed if he knew it.

But over the next days, we all found reason to pass by the hardware store. Every time, we saw Corrie Gray at the counter in yellow or gold or rosy peach, knitting away on the sweater, stopping only to greet a customer or ring up a purchase. We told ourselves it was just the colors she wore, but we all saw the light around her.

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Rosemary Hansen was barely twenty, the youngest of us Allensville wives. Two months after our men left, as fall deepened into winter, she got a letter from her husband in the trenches at Ypres. She didn't tell us what he said. We didn't ask, because the color had gone out of her face, leaving it as pale and fragile as milk glass.

A couple of days later, Mildred Davis passed the hardware store around closing time. She saw Rosemary sitting near the counter in a narrow wooden chair.

We always maintained that good women don't gossip, but we all heard the story one way or another, that evening or the next one. Mildred said that Rosemary had held a ball of khaki wool in her lap. Her mother must not have schooled her, according to Mildred: her knitting needles clicked clumsily, tripping over one another. Mildred said that Corrie and Rosemary didn't say a word to each other. She said, too, that the light in the store looked warmer and brighter than its single lit lamp could account for.

In that light, she said, Rosemary's cheeks had their glow again.

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Commented [FK1]: Love this

That winter, shadows from the trenches found their way into all our houses, dragging with them the rattle of gunfire and haze of smoke. Every one of us wives lay awake at night and choked on the dark.

One day, Anna saw Rosemary on her way to the hardware store and asked if she could walk with her. The next day, Mildred met them at the corner and went along too. Every day after that, more of us found our way there. We all brought some khaki wool and knitting needles along, whether our mothers had schooled us at knitting or not.

Corrie Gray greeted each of us with a smile: we who hadn't bothered to nod to her before. We never told her we were coming, but she always had the exact number of chairs set out in the open space by the counter. Her dresses looked like candlelight and sunset. We still wore our plain Ladies' Aid waists and skirts, all that felt decent when our days revolved around worry and prayer, but our eyes reached out for Corrie again and again. As we all sat together, not speaking, our needles darting in the soft light, our fears crept away into the corners.

Sometimes, as we worked, Corrie hummed the melodies we'd heard her singing in her house. None of us knew them. They were ageless and sweet, like lullabies from the beginning of the world. We took them home with us at night and hummed them again, over our sleeping children.

Every day, we made sweaters. Each of us sent at least one to her husband. Mildred and Anna made many more, though none of our needles could keep pace with Corrie's. The Allensville wives' khaki sweaters went to every man at the front we could reach. Woven into their wool were Corrie's songs and the glow that surrounded us while we worked.

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These days, we know one thing for a fact, though we can't explain it. In a war that took so many, every man who wore an Allensville sweater came home.

Not the same as they were. Every one of us is learning her husband's face again, tracing its new lines, probing the closed-off darkness behind the eyes. We press our lips to cheeks as if we could brush the war-shadows away.

Dan is back in the hardware store, quieter and thinner than he used to be, but he still carries himself like a man with a good-luck charm in his hand. When we walk past her house, we hear her singing. The door is always open. Light reaches us when we step inside.