

**TWELVE O'CLOCK HIGH:
INTO THE WIND**

VIOLENT WINDS

1950

FOREWORD

January 1950: A new decade and a new marriage and a new opportunity: Alexander Komansky, days before taking up duty in the Navy to train as an aviator, marries Margaret Whitfield, and the occasion is made more joyful when Joe and Ceile come. But the reunion is a mixed one as their marriage and the somewhat strained reunion climaxes in a strange meeting with the two men Sandy had encountered before: Vilda and Dryatkin. Joe and Sandy, and their wives, must confront the fact that they are involved, without intending to, with the henges, the mysteries of which keep deepening. The year has its good points as Harvey successfully defends Byron Mahoney in his second trial for rape and intended murder; Sandy and Margaret's marriage flourishes, even after taking on unforeseen duty of Margaret's second cousin Gordon, a can of TNT. Joe and Ceile face separation from their son and from each other as Joe takes on duty for his old friend and nemesis Creighton. And Pres, beating the odds, has survived in Siberia but must survive a daring escape attempt. But, in July 1950, the Korean War commences, opening up three years of violence...

Rumors of war...

In 1945, Korea, finally freed from Japan, was then divided into two zones of occupation: the south administered by the US, and the north administered by the Soviets. The occupation zones were demarcated at the 38th Parallel. This line of division was decided upon to keep the racked country's original capital City of Seoul, in the southern area.

In 1948, three years of a relative peace, but much political jockeying resulted in two countries, two names, two presidents. Expatriate Syngman Rhee, educated in the west, familiar with many western leaders, is elected chairman of the Korean Assembly, and then President. This is countered by the Communist party of the North, led by the 33 year old Kim Il Sung, a fiercely ideological Marxist, who forms the People's Republic of North Korea—strategically backed by China and the Soviet Union.

In January 1950, US Secretary of State Dean Acheson draws America's western defense perimeter. This perimeter includes the Philippines, and the Sea of Japan—and Japan. The perimeter stops short at South Korea. North Korea may have very well interpreted this as a green light to invade the South, and unite the country under the banner of Communism...

Violent Winds

New Directions: January 1950

“Joe, are you up?” Irene’s voice floated up the stairs.

Joe shook his head. His mother could still beat his time—and the time was 4:15. He had a 6:30 flight out of Washington Airport, to San Antonio. “Yes,” he called, and already showered and shaved, he then quickly assumed his clothing—civilian suit, shirt and tie-- already laid out. Though proud of his star, he enjoyed passing as a civilian whenever he could. Irene, despite being a strong hand at her desk as Anson developed television and radio producing talents and programming, still cooked his breakfast when she could. After eating, Joe returned upstairs to get his well-worn B-4 bag, but first quietly entered Frankie’s room. There was a small nightlight glowing; unlike some men, Joe saw no harm of his boy sleeping with a small light for comfort. In its tiny glow, he looked at Frankie, curled under blankets, his golden head buried on his pillow, and then gently awoke him. “Now I want you to be a happy boy while I am gone. My mother and father will take you to the zoo, and to the movies. Ceile’s parents will come to visit you soon and you said you liked your new school and teacher.”

Warm and tousled from sleep, Frankie clung to Joe. “Why are you going?” he whispered.

“I’m going to a wedding in California,” he whispered back.

“Will Mama Ceile be there?”

“Yes, and I will give her a kiss from you. Remember, in the spring, when school is over, you are going to live with her in San Antonio. I hope to be there too.”

He kissed Joe’s cheek and hugged him hard, and Joe could feel his heart breaking as he wrapped his arms around his son. As he literally cradled him, and felt his heart figuratively surrounding him, he thought of the other children that had touched his heart...Christian Borg, who had to see his father return to a land gripped by the Nazis on the hunt for him—and who finally found him. Claudine’s injured son... Emile and Jacques, the two kids in Belgium who lost their grandfather and their home in one day, yet Jacques had been brave and helped him identify critical records...and then he had to fly away and leave the boys there, though the Red Cross had arrived within a few days...

Joe made himself release Frankie and whispered for him to go back to sleep...Frankie subsided, nodding. Keeping back tears, he firmly came downstairs and saw his father seated in the kitchen nook. Joe nearly stopped with fear: he had never seen his father looking so weary—and old. He hitched up his lips in a smile. “Well, waking up to see me off, huh?” Max had recently returned from a series of travels; he had been in Greece with other US personnel seeking to

restore and reassure a pro-western country whose borders were Albania, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia, all Soviet Satellites. He was soon to fly to Formosa for consultation with Chiang Kai-Shek, President of Republic of China—who was requesting the United States establish military bases on the island; Max had to explain why the US resisted his requests, which indicated the two countries intended not to become involved with the civil conflicts in China.

Max poured his son a cup of coffee, and then for Irene, motioning for them to sit down with him. Joe remained standing, cup in hand; his taxi would arrive within minutes. Irene's face told Joe that whatever Max had to say, she knew about it. Max said, "Joe, we don't want you to worry about Pres anymore."

Joe's eye went wide and sharp; eyebrows raised...and then went down to his coffee. "What, uh—have you heard—what did you hear?"

"Nothing. Nothing," Max repeated.

"Well, then what—"

"We want you to let us worry about him," Irene said. "You have important work to do." Left unsaid was what.

"We'll shoulder it," Max said.

"Well, yeah, fine, but how the hell—"

"Joe, when I got word of Jeff, I gave myself ten minutes for some whiskey and then I got on with it."

"That was in the time when a little thing like we finally getting involved in World War II was starting—"

"Ye shall hear of wars and rumors of war," Max said, quoting Revelations. "We got 'em. Danzo, you have important work. I do too, but I'm near the end of my career in the Army and you still have many good years, and becoming distracted by your brother will demoralize you—since December you've been doing splendid work getting NATO operating; Ike himself praised you to me, and it's got to continue—"

"I seem to recall having a conversation like this back in Archbury—back in late 1943. And I was forced...to damn near sacrifice a damned good pilot to get what—I wanted."

"You're right," agreed Max. "But, I admit that I had my eye on getting that star that was being dangled in front of you—"

"No, in front of you," his son corrected, sharply. "It practically ran my group into the ground."

“Hold on,” Irene said. “That’s the past, and we are in the present. Joe...we want you to—of course, excel in your work—not just for yourself or for us but for the—good--of the world. Also, you have a son now that needs your love and attention and there is just so much membrane in your heart...”

When their son was silent, Max and Irene became silent...the membranes of their own hearts hurting for their middle son, who may be the last son... Irene saw Joe’s lids lower and then lift up, revealing some sparkle in his gray eyes. “Well, you don’t often get a chance to unload your worry on others. Okay, I’ll try.”

“That’s my boy,” Max said, reaching out to clap Joe’s shoulders. “I’m not going to say leave everything to us but concentrate on the here and now...not what might be in the past.”

“You two are the greatest parents in the world. Hope I can be half of you to Frankie.”

Max smiled and then excused himself; Joe and Irene saw him reaching for his handkerchief as he left the kitchen. Irene then said to her son, “Joe, you holding something back? When you were a boy, I knew that when you dropped your eyes, even for a second, there were other things.”

“Well, in the military, when you get up into the circles Dad and I move in, yeah, there are other things. Mom, don’t worry about me. Only worry...about Pres.”

“Of course,” Irene said. “And whatever you do...I will love and be proud of you.” Their eyes, riveted on each other, revealed things that Max could never enter into, and understand. She then said, “This is for the Sandy and Margaret. You can open it up.” She handed over a manila envelope.

He did and scanned the document. “Does Dad know about this?” Joe said.

“This is my property to do as I wish.”

“Well...I know Sandy wouldn’t want to be a cause of some kind of argument between you two—I know Dad has always been a bit dodgy about him—or, uncertain. Did he read...any of that crap that Josh wrote about him and me?”

“There were stories floating about even before they got into print. But suffice to say it didn’t do much to raise his confidence in our friend.”

“What he has against Sandy goes beyond this type of junk. I know he didn’t really like wrangling Sandy that two month leave back in 1945 but does he worry that much?”

“Well, your father thought I was—oh, turning him into a replacement for Jeff—as if I could. He thought I might get my heart broken by him, like Marian broke all our hearts. Your dad might also... think that well, Sandy might try to take advantage of us...”

“That guy? All right, he acted like a jerk the first I met him and I think he’s been trying to make it up to me ever since.”

Irene silently remembered Sandy putting himself between her and a sickly vengeful Hinton Chambliss, an incident they had not told anybody... “I never told you that your dad kind of resented Sandy carving name in the mantle.”

“I invited him to do that.”

“I know...” He got up and put his arms around her. He squeezed her shoulder to encourage her. “What is on your agenda today?”

“Something incredibly important,” she managed to laugh. “We need to hire a director for sports reporting and we interviewing a candidate today. He was in the Eighth Air Force.”

“What’s his name?”

“Ted Masters.”

“Tall, good looking guy—an All American?”

“Why, yes.”

“He’ll do,” Joe said, remembering the young man—exploited, careless, caring, overconfident, embarrassed, driven, scared...but showed what he was made of, finally, in the air, with burns to prove it—and knuckled down to learn what an Assistant Adjutant did, though at the 966th-- where, he said, “he wouldn’t be calling the CO ‘Joe’ all the time.” Joe said to Irene, “If he comes in with a guy named, named, uh, Praeger—be patient but don’t let him come into the interview.”

“All right,” she agreed.

“And I haven’t told you about I like that ‘Rory’ in your *Lighthouse Reporter*. His take on the UFO stuff is on target. I mean, he doesn’t absolutely rule out UFOs, which I think is wise, but he anatomizes all the evidence of UFO sightings, and many times proves that a lot of it is hysteria”

"I think so too," Irene said. "Tell me, what do you think of all the UFO sightings?"

"Well...I think a lot of the reports are a kind of seeing things that aren't there or could be mistaken for UFOs, but I really do believe that this planet has been visited, and maybe entertaining some visitors right now. I've read the reports of dead sober pilots that—well, maybe suffering from hypoxia, but they suffered it chasing after mysterious crafts. Well, enough of that. I have to get going. Her eyes were dry but he took a chance. "Mom, whatever I do—it will be the thing I think is right."

Her face became a quiet question mark, but she nodded and Max rejoined her, with dry eyes.

The taxi came, and with a kiss to Irene, and a hug for Max, Joe left. He hoped he wasn't leaving forever. He made himself not think about the little boy, his boy now, still sleeping... He also made himself not think about NATO was not on his plate anymore.

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"Melva, the taxi is here." Harvey's voice went up the stairs. The driver was already carrying their luggage to the cab. Though nearly seven, it was still pitch dark.

"Yes, coming," she called down. He heard the flush of the toilet...He went onto the front porch and signaled to the driver for another minute. He returned inside and the phone rang... oh, damn..."Yes?" he said, almost snapping. Within a moment, his forehead unfurrowed...a date had been set for the appeal for Byron Mahoney, June 23. No location, but he was figuring on the Pentagon. He stowed this into his mind where it bumped up against a message he had received from Joe and Ceile Gallagher.

Melva came down, pale, her eyes swimming, but her lips firmly smiling. She had recurrent attacks of violent nausea after her near "escape" in December. Harvey locked the door, and they hurried to the taxi. Finally, they were on the way to Green Airport at Warwick, for connections to Chicago, and then to Los Angeles. "A wedding puts memories into your mind," said Melva as the taxi drove through the January morning darkness. "It sure does," Harvey agreed, recalling Joe and Ceile Gallagher's first and second wedding, and then their own, only several weeks later.

"And no regrets?"

"Not a one. How about you?" Their recent problems were still quite raw.

"Bad times are over...and they weren't so bad. I made them bad." She then put her hand to her mouth... "I have these," she said when his forehead wrinkled. She produced a bottle of pills from her purse. "They're for airsickness."

He smiled, but worriedly. “Get to the doctor, all right?—when we get home?”

She nodded. She did not tell Harvey she already had.

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“Margaret! Wake up sleepyhead, it’s the big day—or nearly!” Arnold’s voice rushed up the steps and into Margaret’s bedroom. The adjacent pillow had the press of Sandy’s head. He had arrived in her room after midnight, and exhausted, they just lay together and held on to each other before he reluctantly got up to steal back to the cottage around three. “Coming,” she called, and got up to tackle the day before wedding. And then the wedding day—the happiest day of a woman’s life.

She hoped!—she wrote down that sentiment in her journal before going downstairs. She also wrote down how she had that recurring dream again. Well, she often had it when tense. If a wedding couldn’t induce tension, what could? Still, she wondered if someday she would see that mountain that rose out of the blue rivers of mist...a gray-orange peak of raddled stone...

The evening before Harvey and Melva Stovall phoned Sandy that they had arrived safely and were lodged at the Hotel Langham near the Huntington Gardens and Library. They were invited to an informal lunch at his fiancée’s house the next day and in the late morning, Sandy picked them both up. He had been so busy that he had given little thought to seeing Harvey again—yet the moment he saw the greatest adjutant in the world, last seen in person at a train station in Hitchin over four years ago, he felt tears coming to his eyes. He stopped the car in the oval driveway and climbed out to greet Harvey—it started with a handshake that became a mutual hug. “Good night nurse, but it’s good to see you,” Harvey blurted. “Goddam, same here,” Sandy returned.

“Well, where’s your wife to be?” Harvey demanded.

“Keeping the home fires burning,” Sandy said. “And even for a small wedding, there’s a lot of fires! Well, where is yours---uh, wife that is?”

“Here I am,” said a lilting voice coming out of a face with big eyes and dark circles under them. “Harvey, I’m fine, much better,” she said as she joined them. “I suddenly became sick. Hello,” she then said, extending her hand to Sandy. “We’ve met but it was always in passing.”

“I remember you from that party back in 1945...and the wedding at Bryncote,” Sandy grinned. “Uh, ‘Melva’ is it?” and she nodded. “Uh, if you’re not feeling well...”

“Maybe it’s the water here, but I’m fine, really.”

During the drive to Altadena, Harvey admired the sunshine, the weather, the palms, the homes—the amazing interlacing whorl of roads—and then grinned at Sandy. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Can it wait?” Sandy said, steering around a common sight of two cars, involved in a collision—not a bad one, fortunately. Every time he saw a car accident...something tried to stir in his memory.

“Of course.”

They drove up the hill to Margaret’s home; Melva stared at the thick-boled towering palms lining the streets and festive gardens surrounding bungalow homes that ranged from English-style cottages to haciendas, to conventional frame houses. The United States was startling with her with how different other parts of the country were and Los Angeles seemed to be completely different from anything! They parked in the driveway of a modest blue two-story home, with white eaves and a picket fence. A young woman was waiting on the front porch. Her thick brunette hair and blue eyes were beautiful, and her face was smiling.

Margaret came down the walk to greet the middle-aged lawyer and his wife, a nurse, she understood. Felicity stood on the porch, barked and then sat down, politely. Margaret already loved Harvey by Sandy’s telling about him, and wanted to know Melva better; as a teacher of British literature anybody with an English accent thrilled her...

“My goodness,” Melva said, looking around the front lawn and the flowers, “It’s true what they say about California...Oh!—may I have an orange? I’ve been craving one.”

“Not those,” Margaret said of the tree in the front lawn, whose fruit hung like jewels among leaves. “Those are sour oranges—good for marmalade only! But we have navel oranges in the house...come in, come in!” Margaret gave Melva an orange which she immediately peeled and ate—to Harvey’s relief, the color truly came back into her face, and she smiled. “Suddenly, I am very hungry!—didn’t have much breakfast this morning...and I have to compliment you on your climate! Back home we have a month of snow nowhere near melting, and everything’s gray.”

“Thanks,” Margaret smiled. “But in a few days or so our weather wizards have said a major winter storm is coming in.”

“Snow? Here?”

“Rain here, but a different story in the Sierras where we’re honeymooning—“ The doorbell rang. Margaret rose and went to the door in the entryway. Sandy then said to Harvey, “Is this the surprise...?”

“Yes,” Harvey said, and then a moment was surprised himself.

Sandy heard a familiar voice that he struggled to identify-- "I declah, Miss Whitfield, we had a hawd time findin' you--"

"Preux?" Sandy launched himself at the door to find E.J. Preux beaming at him and at the curious Margaret.

"And I do declah again, Mr. Alexander Komansky, just as I was expecting...Did they tell you I was coming?"

"I didn't know you were," Harvey protested.

"Yo' not the 'they.' They aren't here, I see..."

Before they could qualify the answer, a car stopped in front of the house with a grind of brakes. Sandy looked out the front window. Joe Gallagher emerged from a taxi, and helped Ceile out.

"That's the surprise," Harvey to Sandy's clenched face. "Or it was."

They all met on the walk though Margaret lingered on the porch, and Preux was good enough not to grab his camera and start snapping this sentimental moment. It would have been a great one too, as Joe and the missus had their Air Force blue Dress A uniforms on and their old friend was stunned.

"Well, Gator," Ceile said, grinning over Joe's shoulder.

"Hi yourself, to you and yours," Gator beamed. "Great to see you two again. And for the usual purposes, of course."

Joe emerged from Sandy's hug to shake his hand. "I take it they are 'they,'" Sandy laughed. But it was a little hysterical. Joe then saw a pretty brunette pausing on the front porch. "Please read this letter," he said to Sandy, handing it off to his former aide. "With this lovely young woman." They did:

Dear Margaret and your fiance:

I start this letter with a kind of apology but first of all to you Margaret:

Yes, I have been out of touch with your fiance for reasons both good and bad. The bad reasons: like everybody else, the post-war years have been stressful, both professionally, and personally.

I guess I felt that you, Sandy, needed to get on with normal life, and that is one of the reasons why I didn't write. I know you know about Ceile and me not telling you about the loss of our daughter, several days after we left Bryncote. At first it was painful and then we didn't want to burden you, but you should have known from us. We are sorry. That is all we can say.

I admit, we are inviting ourselves, or least asking if we may invite ourselves. To make matters more complicated, I and Ceile have to become movie stars again, at the request of PRO. There has been grumbling about the Armed Forces integrating and the usual other complaints and it was put forth that an Air Force general attending the wedding of his former aide would look good on the silver screen. I know Sandy this stinks a bit of St Laurent sur Mer, but that film did a lot of good between the US and the French government.

Margaret, we are looking forward to meeting you. Harvey has told us about you and so has my mother, who saw you and Sandy on television in 1948. Here is hoping to see you soon and that you allow us to attend your wedding.

Our best regards,

Joe and Ceile

Margaret and Sandy raised their eyes at the two people who looked both firm and a bit feckless. Joe grinned his inimitable grin but glanced at his shoes. But Sandy saw they were holding hands, a good thing to see. He knew they had gone through some bad times.

Preux cleared his throat. "Ah think we should be explainin' too...Miss Mawgaret, we were invited here without yo' puhmission, I will confess right now. But the General heah was to call Mistuh Stovall heah and let' ya know..."

"I'll take over... if I may," Joe said. He came forward to shake Margaret's hand and give it a kiss...and beckoned Ceile over. "Margaret, I am so glad to meet you," they said in near unison.

She looked at the happy but concerned faces all around her and then summoned her strength. "Please come in, and, have lunch, and uh, tell me, us...more about all this..."

"Of course," Joe and Ceile said in unison, both knowing they would tell them a lot, but not everything.

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Margaret and Sandy brought cold cuts, bread, condiments and fruit salad to the table, originally for four, as Mrs. Whitfield had not yet appeared as she was hard at work at her sewing. Now that seven were present, everybody politely took smaller portions in the informal lunch. Joe put everybody at their ease, and soon everybody was laughing, talking, joking and bringing in names Margaret did not recognize, like a Susanne...who was in Baton Rouge Louisiana, busy with the children; two, daughter Yvette and son Jean, called "Johnny," Preux reported.

Margaret was so overwhelmed with a sudden infusion of people from Sandy's past life, she forgot about her mother, completing the matron of honor dress...and Elona came down,

flourishing an ivory gown. “All done! Duvina is coming for the rehearsal and I can fit her then—” She stopped and stared at all the people—seven—at the table. The men rose.

“Mama,” Margaret said and stood up.

“What is going on?” said Mrs. Whitfield, violently surprised at the number of people in her living room.

“Mrs. Whitfield,” Sandy said. “These are...well, General Gallagher is my former CO and his wife, uh, Ceile, um, O’Briean. Major O’Briean. This is Emile-Jules Preux, an old friend. They are late arrivals—”

“Who are very welcomed,” Margaret inserted.

“They weren’t on the list—”

“We can accommodate four more,” Margaret said. She then said to her mother, “You mean Diana, not Duvina—didn’t you?”

“No, no, Duvina--you asked for Duvina—which surprised me...”

“It was Diana—I put it down in black and white.”

“Ah...” Elona said.

“...Daisy?” Sandy said, coming up behind her and putting his hands on her shoulders. He understood why she disliked Duvina—however, this wedding had been tossed together in four weeks and mistakes would happen—which was what Margaret was saying through clenched teeth, and her mother was desperately trying to come up with remedies for the situation through a flurry of apologies and then tears when Margaret turned away from her. Margaret then managed a smile at the calm Harvey, old and experienced enough not to be too embarrassed at this rattling tattoo of wedding nerves. He had a few himself, in 1923 when he and Rachel, due to both their parents’ wishes, suffered a church wedding with all the frills and furbelows. “Mama, I’m sorry I shouted. But--Duvina, no—”

“Daisy, this wedding went together like greased lightning,” Sandy said. “And it’s kind of my fault in that I wanted a real wedding—”

“I wanted one too. But greased or not—God, *Duvina*—I won’t have it, I just won’t. Well, ho-ney, we can always elope—and I’m ready to do it.”

The company tactfully withdrew to the patio. The bride and groom were in anxious conversation with the bride’s mother. Hmph, Ceile snorted to herself and then told herself not to jump to conclusions.

Joe was speaking to the old Cajun gator. "I knew you were coming, but not the PRO—uh, making an—"

"Invasion," Preux supplied. They looked up a little too quickly when the happy couple came out on the patio with coffee and cookies. After Margaret poured her own coffee and sat down, Preux said to her, "I don't think you two really gave me permission to film your wedding. You count too."

Margaret and Sandy deferred to each other. "If you want to, then I want to," she insisted. Sandy, sitting on the arm of Margaret's chair, kept his face blank...though a furrow was forming between his eyes... "Kind of late notice, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yo ain't whistlin' Dixie," Preux said.

"Who gave the orders?" Joe ventured.

Preux was honest. "Not at liberty to say exactly, but the cause is a good one."

Sandy gazed into six sets of eyes...and detected all kinds of motives and interests and desperation...and then took Margaret's hand. "Daisy, it's up to you."

Margaret knew something more important than her wedding was going on. "Yes, of course."

"Well, thank you," Gator said, at his most ingratiating, which meant in this case putting aside his Cajun accent. "It's mighty kind of you to agree to this at such a late moment." He then talked of how the wedding would be filmed: from a distance, with long-view lenses. He could film close ups of a "pretend" wedding before the real ceremony. He then asked Margaret for the names in the wedding party which he wrote down...including this "Duvina B---?" "No," Margaret said with some asperity, "I don't know how to spell it." When she was not looking, Preux checked the telephone book, and didn't find anything even close. He did so after he selected the kitchen window over the sink to film the wedding at a distance...

With things more or less settled, Sandy, Margaret, Joe, Ceile, Harvey and Melva, chatted over more coffee. Melva, listening, drifted off on the cushions of the lounge. After a moment, Margaret excused herself...to see how her mother was doing, and Ceile asked to use the bathroom. Joe then grinned at Sandy. "Sure was glad to hear about your marriage."

"How did you?" Sandy asked, point blank. He detected something artificial in Joe's voice and behavior but was still so happy about having his CO, his mentor, his friend—and his wife, and apparently everything was okay between them... he pushed his worries aside.

"Harvey. And we owe you more than a simple apology--"

“You don’t owe me a thing. It’s great you being here. And I thought that, uh--” Sandy said, suddenly glancing at Harvey.

“I know you asked me to be Best Man,” Harvey said. “But that was before we knew this charming hunk of Irish blarney was going to be here. And I recall him—there at Bryncote--swearing that when you got married, he’d be there for you. And that wasn’t brandy talking.”

Sure of Harvey’s approval Sandy asked, “Joe, would you be my best man?”

“I’ll think about it... of course, you loudmouthed pain in the—neck.” He laughed at Sandy’s vivid blue stare. Even now, Joe realized, that frightened little orphan boy was still peeking around the mature, successful man that Sandy was becoming but after all, he was a bridegroom.

“Thanks. God, I can’t believe it...you’re both here!—and...”

Ceile touched Joe’s arm, saying Preux needed them to find their “marks” on the lawn for the wedding. “And, Sandy, Margaret’s in her room, crying.” She told him this with a neutral face.

Sandy went from joyful to stricken—but knew damned well that Margaret had the right to be upset. The wedding hadn’t gone 180, but was veering close.

“How about if I talk with her?” Ceile offered.

“Well, uh, you don’t know her,” Sandy said.

“If she’s your fiancée, then I think I know her.” She gave Sandy a light peck on the cheek. “It’s gonna be okay,” she assured him. Confidently, she started upstairs, knowing she could straighten the kid out.

“Hey,” Joe then said to Sandy as they went outside for Preux’s directions. “I have pictures of our son to show you.”

“Of course! Harvey wrote me— Frank Savage’s son, really?”

“Yep,” Joe said, pulling a photo out of his wallet as they found their mark, stood still, and waited. Sandy studied it: between Joe and Ceile, in their military garb, arms on his shoulders, stood a six year old boy, an enormous grin on his face. “I’ll be damned,” he murmured. “You can see his dad....is he like his dad--? Well, you know what I mean.”

“Time will have to tell,” Joe said, lightly. But he was curious about that himself—would blood tell? And that would be no bad thing, but Joe didn’t like the thought of Frankie’s eyes glaring at the world like the beam from an enraged lighthouse....

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Margaret, seated on her bed, stood up at Ceile's gentle but decisive knock on the open door. "May I come in?" she asked, and smiled when Margaret's mother poked her head out of the sewing room, satin in her hands, and pins in her mouth. Her eyes met Ceile's direct if friendly ones, and then dropped.

Margaret was not really crying, but her eyes were red and there were crumpled tissues on the bed and the floor. Ceile sighed for Margaret and then for Sandy. She hadn't cried at either of her weddings, though both were a little crazy.

Margaret was aware she was meeting Ceile O'Brien, whom Sandy had...mentioned. More than once. Mentioned in ways that made Margaret dread meeting her, at least a bit. The face was beautiful without being pretty; her eyes green and friendly but intense, and her dark red-brown hair pinned back. Dressed in uniform with her ribbons stacked neatly over her left pocket, Ceile made Margaret say a bit humbly, "Yes, please." The younger woman felt as though she were meeting Wonder Woman in the flesh.

Ceile stepped into Margaret's feminine but not frilly room. She saw satin shoes and a simple hat with a veil on her dresser. Margaret's wedding dress, carefully hung up, gleamed from a hook on the closet door. It was simple in line and was eye-pleasing shade of ivory, rather than blinding white. She then looked at Margaret who was sitting on the bed, her arms folded. "Sorry for acting like a three year old. Hi sweetie," she murmured when Felicity came into the room, her pop-eyed little face wary. She sat down near Margaret's bed and crossed her paws.

"You've had a lot flung at you in the last hour—the day before your wedding, too. A bunch of strangers, and then, well, a family issue-- You have a right to be angry...and...maybe a bit fearful?" Margaret didn't flick an eyelid, but Ceile nonetheless knew she had hit a nerve...fear of the wedding or of the marriage?

"I bet you weren't scared at your wedding."

"Didn't have time," Ceile said, grinning as memories came up. "The first time was too fast and the second time was too crazy!"

"Sandy said that you married General Gallagher in—what did he call it—"

"Hardstand hitching," Ceile said. "I got out of a plane, put in a car, and driven to Joe's B-17 where the preacher awaited! And then we got married again two years later at this great big crazy party at this enormous old English manor. Sandy must have talked about it."

"Oh yes...what a life you three, well, two, have led."

"There's been another change," Ceile then volunteered. "Joe is going to be the Best Man—Harvey agreed, because, well, that was the plan made a while back. Is it all right?"

"Why of course! Sandy thinks so highly of your husband. And you too," she added awkwardly.

Mrs. Whitfield tapped on the open door. "I need to take the final hem on your dress," she said, glancing at Ceile as though she were a man and not welcomed. And she was shocked at the woman's trousers and jacket adorned with military insignia. "Mama, this is Major Ceile O'Briean," Margaret said.

Mrs. Whitfield nodded, but said, "I thought you are married to General Gallagher."

"I am, but I use my own last name." This received a blank stare. Which Ceile enjoyed.

Margaret's mother blushed a bit when her daughter removed her dress and slipped her wedding gown on and placed her feet into her heels. Putting on her glasses, Elona knelt on the floor with her yard stick, and with pins between her lips. "That's a lovely dress," the military woman said. "You sew beautifully."

"Does your mother sew well?" Mrs. Whitfield asked Ceile, removing pins from her lips.

"Heavens no! She hasn't done a stitch and neither have I," the woman said, with shocking pride. "How did you and Sandy meet?" she then asked Margaret.

"Not as excitingly as you," Margaret said. "Sandy told me how you landed a plane at their base—"

"Crashed," Ceile corrected. "Our plane was damaged. I had to land it. Didn't do a crash hot job either!—and Joe was ready to ream me out until he found it I was a WAC...and the rest is history. We decided to marry the next night."

Mrs. Whitfield stared at Ceile, and it was not with awe. More like shock...

"But how did you meet Sandy?" Ceile said, not daring to glance at Mrs. Whitfield.

"At a veteran clinic where I volunteer. I woke him to see the doctor, and he had been having a violent dream...but we later met again at a nearby drugstore...I owe the *Saturday Evening Post* a big debt."

"Hm?"

"I happened to be reading the article about him in the *Post*...a really nice article...and he didn't scare me anymore. And I guess the rest is history too. Because here we are...you know, I am really glad you are here," she said, a little awkwardly. "I know Sandy is too."

“Finished. Now...Duvina?” Mrs. Whitfield then asked. Her voice was timid.

“No Duvina,” Margaret said.

Ceile wondered if this were Margaret being strong...or spoiled. And who the hell was this Duvina? And what the hell had she done to Margaret? Ceile then warned herself...as Joe had told her, and she had told herself, you don’t know the whole story. Quit assuming. To her, for years, the story lay in the man on the stretcher, the child on the road, the sick pregnant woman in a cavern, and all that mattered was immediate care, no questions of the origins...

“But the dress...she’s coming early for a final fitting tomorrow morning.”

“Over my dead body! She could knock on the door at three tomorrow morning and I would tell her to ...Mama, how did you make such a mistake?”

“I guess I misread Diana for Duvina—“

“I TYPED the list...no wonder Diana was acting like that when I called her last week—she could have told me then that she never received my invitation—“

“Well, um, I guess I need new glasses.” She took off the cheap pair she had on, wiped and replaced them. “Honey, please let Duvina be your matron of honor, it’s too late to start changing things.”

“I can do without a matron of honor,” Margaret retorted. “Sandy and I could have married at the courthouse without a matron of honor and everything would have been perfectly legal—“

“But the dress—“

Ceile saw Margaret sizzle up—and Felicity ducking under the bed’s dust ruffle. Ceile heard herself speaking words that at the moment surprised her, and later amazed her: “Can I serve as your Matron of Honor?”

“What?” This came from Mrs. Whitfield before Margaret had a chance to say yea or nay. Margaret brushed her mother’s response aside with “Why, yes—yes.” But rather than looking happy, she looked disturbed. Mrs. Whitfield repeated, “But the dress...”

“I could wear my uniform,” Ceile said.

“What you have on?” Mrs. Whitfield blurted this.

“I could wear my uniform skirt,” Ceile then offered...wanting to slap Mrs. Whitfield...Whitfield...

Margaret said quickly, “The general...he’ll be in uniform too, right, as Best Man?”

“Yes. And we married in uniform. Twice!” Mrs. Whitfield’s face sank into a frown of disappointment if not horror.

“Mam,” Ceile then said, “I would gladly wear the dress, but if it was especially made for someone else...”

Mrs. Whitfield then rose to the occasion. “You are about the same height as Duvina. You are broader in the shoulders and back, but...” She hurried out and then hurried back with a silvery dress. She held it against Ceile’s back to test for breadth. “I could cut the back open, insert a panel, edge it with lace...”

Ceile quailed a bit...actually, her surprise, tinged with some horror grew. Horror, why horror she asked herself. For heaven’s sake, what’s a dress when Sandy was getting married?—particularly since they were finally gathering him to their hearts again. “Of course! Can you fit me now?”

“One moment,” she said and flew out. Ceile then looked at Margaret—and her face balanced three ways between surprise, worry and maybe some relief. “Well, thank you,” she said aloud, and asked for Ceile’s help in unzipping and stepping out of her wedding dress. Ceile was direct enough to say, “You know, that was pretty upfront of me, and really, if you don’t want me—”

“Of course I do! And fitting, since your husband is going to be Best Man.”

“That’s been a kind of plan for years. Me, I’m a latecomer to this shindig, uh...”

“Call it what you wish,” Margaret laughed, though a bit hysterically. “And Sandy and I are pretty much doing this for my mother—no, that’s not fully true. Sandy told me he didn’t want anything big but he wanted a real wedding this time—I mean, he nearly married two times before me...” She flushed a bit at her admission that she was number three...

Ceile said kindly, “He’s really, truly marrying you. I heard—he knew you were the one when he proposed to you on the front porch, in front of your parents.”

“He did, all right. And, I wanted a real wedding too after nearly...” She glanced at Ceile, a little disturbed at how easily she was talking to this woman whom she met in person less than two hours before...but had heard a great deal about from Sandy. He had clearly admired her, a flight nurse, who had been in some pretty hot zones. “Why are you doing this?” she blurted.

“Well, it’s the least I could do for so suddenly arriving, uninvited.”

“Yes, well,” Margaret said, fecklessly, and then her mother bustled in. Felicity sensed a change in the atmosphere and emerged from under the bed. Tongue lolling, she watched while Ceile stripped down to her non-GI underwear and stepped into the dress, a little horrified at what was going on. Ceile was pricked by pins, told to sit down, and then stand up. Then she felt the

cold blade of Mrs. Whitfield's shears as the woman fearlessly cut the satin, and then the panel pinned in. Folds of cloth were pinned around her hips. "That will do for the moment," Elona said. Margaret helped her out of the dress and Elona took it away. "But I will need you in about ten minutes."

"That mother of yours can really sew," she remarked. She could see the woman's skill and she admired skill, whether in nursing, administering a business, and in the domestic arts.

"Mama is a great seamstress," Margaret said, picking up pins. "I'm pretty good but not like her."

"You weave I understand," Ceile said, adjusting her bra.

"I wove that bedspread."

"Wow," said Ceile. She truly admired any skill, but...weaving? "My mother did try to sew once...and decided she would rather support a dressmaker!"

"Hey, you ladies upstairs!" came Joe's shout. "We're coming up to get you if you don't come down immediately!"

Margaret came down quickly. "What's up?"

"Your cake! It's ready and I would like to pay for it in apology for swanning in the way we have."

Minus Ceile, who called down the stairs that she had to stay to be fitted. They went in quest of the cake that had been baked at an Armenian pastry shop. They returned home, carefully carried the modest two-tier cake in and laid it on the dining room table, already covered with a fine white lace tablecloth. Margaret covered it with a net, and in the meantime Arnold arrived, unaware of all the additional heck that was consuming his house. He walked into a gaggle of people he didn't know but they clearly knew each other; a friendly man in the kitchen was setting up cameras, aimed at the back lawn, then, a man in uniform—Good lord, a general!—and his wife was upstairs, pins clamped in her lips, her hands pushing satin under a drilling needle, her foot furiously pumping the treadle of the machine she would not give up for a new electrified model. Taking the pins from her mouth, as she fitted a dress around he had been introduced to as the wife's general, no, the general's wife, she rattled on about how Margaret was furious because Duvina...well, how did that happen...but that Army woman downstairs was going to be—Felicity sat on her hip, and panted, and watched. Arnold nodded, said he knew everything would be okay, because, dear, you are in charge, and made his way back downstairs into pre-wedding hysteria. Well, all right. This would be done tomorrow and Margaret was getting a fine man. The fine man had fine friends, he soon decided, being introduced to Joe Gallagher, Ceile O'Briean back in uniform, Harvey Stovall and his wife Melva who had a British

accent. A knock on the door, which nobody heard, announced a face and a voice.... “Hello, I’m here for the rehearsal!” Police Chaplain Tyler Freds called as he came in.

Margaret laughed a little hysterically, and Ceile winced again. Now, come on, she told herself, quit being...but she was unsure she was best woman for her—for Sandy. It was so good to see him again; age had made him handsomer...

They all trooped outside; Mrs. Whitfield was forced away from her machine. They assembled on the lawn, an aisle marked with rag strips; rented chairs would be brought in the morning. Ceile sealed her fate by announcing she would be the Matron of Honor. “My queen?” Joe said as this was the first he had heard about the change. “Yes,” she announced.

Following the police chaplain’s directions, they rehearsed the simple ceremony. It was soon over, and Ceile found herself a little wet under the armpits...and said to Margaret, “When I married, I had a Man of Honor, Harvey here.” Mrs. Whitfield’s face blazed with...horror...at the idea and looked to her daughter for her thoughts, but Margaret was staring at three figures which had appeared on the back patio.

“I’m here to be fitted for the dress,” Duvina announced.

“Plans changed,” Margaret announced back. “Ceile here is my matron of honor.”

“What?”

“Remember how you once invited me to your house to meet that boy I liked and nobody was there—payback, cousin.”

“Why you—bitch,” Duvina cried.

“Get lost,” Margaret returned.

Ceile watched this. Margaret was proving herself a fighter in a way, but to create such a fuss—over a mistake her mother had made—but there had been humiliation involved.

“Duvina, Duvina—it’s best we leave,” her husband said. His voice was soothing and cautious. There was an eight year old kid who looked both bored and startled with the whole affair.

“Damn right we leave and you don’t get our present—“

“Yeah, leave,” Margaret said.

They did, with Gordon sticking his tongue out at them, but seemed to make a special face at Sandy. They all stood around a bit astonished at what had happened. Sandy broke the taut moment by taking Margaret’s hand and saying “The winner!”

Margaret smiled. Sandy guided her to the patio and sat her down...after a moment, she grinned. "My apologies. Every family has its issues." The way Sandy smiled at her, Ceile could tell he agreed with her actions. Well, she thought, perhaps they were creeps.

**

"How about dinner?" Harvey proposed after the rehearsal. "Margaret, where's a place that can take on about ten people all of a sudden?"

Within an hour they were sitting in Bobbie's Diner, a clean greasy spoon where they bit down on hamburgers, eggs and ham, fresh bean soup and biscuits. Gator stayed behind; he needed to mark the camera positions on the lawn, and then would store them in the back cottage. Margaret and Ceile were seated next to each other in an extra-large booth. Margaret was too overwhelmed to notice that Ceile hardly addressed a word to her.

"No bachelor party?" Harvey asked Sandy, yawning over his coffee.

"I'm hitting the hay. And I'm picking up my Uncle Tym at the bus station in the morning. He's coming in from Oakland."

"Can we take you home?" Harvey offered.

"I've been staying in the cottage in the back." He kissed his fiance's hand, taking a nibble of the ketchup on her fingers. "And if you need to know, Margaret's staying with her folks until early June, after school ends she'll join me in Pensacola."

"Say, are you two getting a honeymoon?"

"Three days," Margaret said. "I have a substitute at the high school lined up— honestly, the amount of time you spend preparing for a substitute, you'd rather teach the class yourself— except this time," she laughed.

"Where are you going?" Melva asked. She was eating a bowl of chowder with good appetite, Harvey was relieved to note.

"My professor Nowel at Cal Tech arranged for us to stay in his cabin in the Sierras. We're driving up after the reception. We may get snowbound though if the weather predictions are right..."

"Ah, that might be too bad," Joe said, teasingly. "But the Navy wouldn't see it that way."

Freed up by the convivial company, Margaret then confessed that her mother was so shocked at them "camping in the woods," for their honeymoon—what would people think?— they agreed to leave in elegant clothing, and then return secretly to the cottage to change into their backwoods togs and leave again.

Sandy and Margaret were returned home. Elona was still sewing and Arnold was calmly eating a chicken salad sandwich in the kitchen, with Felicity gazing on, and getting nibbles. The living room was ready; the furniture was placed back; and the credenza was laden with gifts. Outside the back French doors, Margaret could see that the white rental chairs were already set up and covered with sheets against the damp night. Two teenage boys down the street had been hired to greet the guests and park their cars at a park two blocks away. The refrigerator was full of salads and finger sandwiches, and Elona's sorority sisters were bringing in additional dishes. "Well, I guess we are ready as we can be," she remarked. The cake, lightly draped with net, looked a bit ghostly on the dining room table. And then there were the cameras set up at the kitchen sink window to film the wedding.

Hand in hand, he and Margaret walked out to the little apartment. Elona, Sandy recalled, under some protest, had made up the bed and hung towels and flushed with some embarrassment when, for the last two weeks, he had come for breakfast. She was positive the neighbors suspected something. The couple, happy but unsettled, kissed in his doorway, and safely in the dark, their hands roamed over each other's bodies, sighing, looking forward to their wedding, and looking forward to it being over...and the both of them on the road, heading for that cabin for three precious days of solitude. Sandy had the directions already folded in the glove compartment of Margaret's car, being used because he had sold his own.

"Good night, husband of mine as of about 10:45 tomorrow." Ten thirty was the time to start the walk. Then a quick reception, and a departure by 12:30.

"Good night, Daisy."

"Good night, Ho-ney. And I'm okay with everything."

"There's a lot of things to be okay about," he admitted.

She thought so too. That night, she wrote her last entry in her journal as a single woman. She veered off into some guilt feelings of creating that scene with Duvina and her husband—ugh, that creep, and her awful kid.

**

"What's this about being matron of honor?" Joe asked, as they got ready for bed. They registered at the hotel where Harvey and Melva were staying, and said their goodnights after a round of brandy in the lounge.

Ceile came out of the bathroom, toweling her hair dry. "That poor kid needed some support at a bad—well, a difficult time."

"You think of her as a kid?"

“Well...she’s been living at home all her life—she’s not exactly under her mother’s thumb, but you can pick up some prints—and Antonia and this Aurora were more worldly I guess.”

“I think Sandy wants a home.”

“So why is he going into the Navy?” Ceile joked.

“He told me that it just seemed the right thing to do. And his heart’s found a home in Margaret, I think.”

“Maybe so,” she agreed. “I mean, Joe, I want the best for him...”

“You think she isn’t?”

“What do you think?”

“Well...we get one glimpse of a situation years in the making.”

“Yes, I know... but still, I just don’t know about her.”

They were silent, knowing that beyond these issues, they were taking a terrible chance with Sandy’s friendship which, after four tenuous years, had been re-established just that afternoon. There were important questions to be answered. If all went right, answering the questions created some new obstacles in their relationship. “So, tell me about this dress...”

“Girl’s clothes. Very girl clothes. And egad, a hat. Gloves.”

“My queen, you will be beautiful, and it’s very nice of you.”

“It would be nice of you...if you run interference if Duvina shows up?... I feel kinda sorry for her, but she doesn’t exactly get any vote from me either.”

They got into bed, switched off the light, and just enjoyed lying next to each other, on cool sheets and under a warm blanket. What would happen tomorrow...would happen.

**

Knowing that they would just be in the way of the organized chaos that would engulf the Whitfield house that morning, Joe, Ceile, Harvey and Melva took time over breakfast at the Langham. California was living up to its legend as the maritime layer lifted, dissolved over the mountains, and the sun beamed down. At least three of them admired this display, with Melva suddenly going pale and leaving. To Ceile’s worried glance, Harvey said, “The plane ride seemed to disagree with her—she was barely over some germ. Our flight out here was the first time she had been on a plane!—didn’t know that until we were in the air.”

After a few minutes, Melva returned. She easily finished her breakfast, listening while Ceile and Joe told Harvey about Frankie's arrival in New York; the fun they had had; the surprising moments when suddenly Frankie broke down and cried, missing his friends back in England, and missing Redline the aging mutt who loved all the kids as he had once loved all the airmen at the 918th. He had already started American first grade at a public school three blocks away from Irene and Max's townhome, where Joe was staying. Though he was coming in at mid-year, some tests convinced the school principal that the young half-American boy with a lilting English voice was already reading, he had learned his numbers, was quite definitely sufficient in deportment and was eager to start. At a routine conference with the teacher several weeks later, the teacher praised his work and his behavior, but seemed worried about a sense of "unease" their boy had, and his shyness. They offered some explanation of his fears, and they agreed, that time and love would probably reassure him.

This was followed with questions if Ceile liked her work, as Commander of the School of Aeronautical Aviation. "Yes, but as they say, 'those who can't, teach.'"

"Can't do what?" Joe teased. "You 'could' for years in Africa and Europe. You don't have a thing to prove whether putting your lovely—behind--on the line, or putting your lovely face in the classroom. I bet in field maneuvers you'll have them beat."

"Well, Joe, where are you going to be—or where are you?" Harvey then asked.

"Around." Joe tapped out a cigarette and lighted it. Harvey let the subject drop. He recognized when Joe was on the edge...edge of what? He could only assume that Joe was involved in "weeds" work and not at liberty to talk.

They climbed into a taxi, with Ceile jokingly directed the drive to "the slaughter."

"Mam?" the driver asked.

"A wedding," and she gave the address, and wondered she had used such a violent term.

By the end of the day, at about three in the morning somewhere in the Sierras, their lives had taken on the quality of the day at the shambles.

**

The Whitfield house discreetly seethed. Margaret was merry to cover up her nervousness; Arnold was calm—after all, he was a policeman and knew when affairs were really wild, though he knew there were undercurrents gong on—and Elona was pale with anxiety. Felicity, seeming to understand how she could best contribute, stayed curled up in her dog bed next to the water heater in the kitchen, deeply asleep.

Sandy had departed at an early hour in Margaret's car and returned, bearing his uncle with him. Elona anxiously awaited his arrival...he was a Polish immigrant and she had recently seen a movie on their new television set, with such, big rough fellows...and was relieved when she met him. He was slender and white-haired, and said his gentle accented hellos with a simple handshake. Arnold, far more accustomed to meeting people, of all kinds, walks of life, etc., greeted him effusively, and caused his face to light up in a smile. In careful English, he told them he would sit quietly by himself for he knew weddings were busy affairs...what a beautiful garden...and their daughter was a nice girl, and a teacher, so right for his nephew...whom he was not sure he was alive until 1945 when his daughter and his nephew met each other in Germany, picking up POWs for home...and they were finally reunited in Oakland, in 1946. His nephew and recently his niece had spoken to him about moving to Los Angeles, particularly since his daughter flew into the city several times. But no, he was happy with his work at the academy where he tutored Latin, and seemed to quiet and happy in his Catholic faith, that his nephew never pressed it...mainly because he had so little in common with the older man, his roots still in Poland and in the past. Sandy showed him the cottage and his uncle gratefully stretched out on the couch.

Elona was ceaselessly checking on the food, the clothing, watching for guests—what if nobody came--?—and finally the weather; big gray clouds were drifting over, and why did her daughter insist on getting married outside? The handwritten invitations might have put some off. And the camera by the sink—When the quartet arrived, early, she swept Ceile upstairs...in a minute, Ceile was stripped to her underwear again; told to put on her stockings, which she did, hating the feel of the girdle she had squeezed into that morning, and the stockings the girdle was holding up with those lousy clips. Then she needed to raise her arms, and the dress, its cloth still acid with sizing, was slid down over her head and jerked down around her hips. She stood still and was pricked; she realized Elona was sewing her into the dress. She sighed and stood still. "Get into your shoes," Elona directed her and then pointed her to the mirror. She obeyed. The shoes were too big, which was better than being too small.

Ceile stared at herself...thinking she had never worn a fancy dress so perfectly adapted for her. The shoulders were smooth but not tight. The dress was cut into a modest vee-neck which accentuated her bosom. The panel that Elona had sewed into the back was a masterpiece of design, emphasizing her graceful back. Whenever Ceile gave thought to her hips she wished they were more slender; the draped cloth flattered them and her. Best of all, it was not flouncy and frou-frou, it was graceful but with a tailored edge. "This is beautiful," she said. Ceile's sincerity made Elona smile at her for the first time.

"It is!" Margaret said, in the doorway. "Mama, you're a genius with a needle!"

Elona was truly pleased and suddenly she hugged Ceile and hugged her daughter. Then she began to cry, and it was not affectation. She was truly happy, at the moment. Ceile smiled, a bit strainedly, and found and pinned on the little wafer of a hat with a light veil. Gloves—her own, and the right size.

Joe knocked at the open door. “Sandy needs to know...omigosh, Ceile, is that you?” His eyes were delighted with her satin dress and white velvet hat. “Now, them’s girls clothes!”

“Yes they are, but you admire the bride,” she told him. He grinned at them both and then he and Elona left. “Your mother is truly a wonderful seamstress,” Ceile said, making sure Margaret knew she was sincere.

“Thank you,” Margaret said and became confidential. “And if you wonder about my mother—well, one thing about living with her so long I know what kind of wife and mother I don’t want to be.”

“Which is?”

“She’s never been happy, or contented or satisfied for reasons I’m not sure of. She doesn’t approve of Sandy—but well, she would not have approved of anybody. My father takes care of us, and she doesn’t scold him but she always is—at arm’s length with him. She’s been a kind of frustrated housewife, but won’t work outside the house either... I want her to be proud of me but I never can seem to make it. Well, that’s some deep talk for a wedding day, isn’t it?” Ceile thought so, but liked Margaret more. Yet, it was not nice to tell a stranger about your mother’s problems...

The doorbell rang and they both heard Elona cry, “Oh, thank goodness, the flowers!” Craning their necks out of Margaret’s side window, they saw the modest floral displays being set up by the altar and Elona brought up their bouquets. Both were modest as well, but perfectly nice. Preux then arrived, and obligingly disappeared into the kitchen to check on the camera.

The sorority sisters arrived with food. Dishes clanked and female voices called back and forth to each other. Sandy, shaven and dressed in his altered Oxford Street suit, and more or less useless at the moment, wandered about the lawn, straightening the chairs...he used to straighten the chairs in the assembly hut before the pilots and the crews arrived, in the dark, rushing in to get as near as they could to the potbelly stove that he come to be quite good at stoking...

Early guests arrived. Three of Arnold’s fellow officers and their wives. The doctor from the Veteran’s Clinic, who had treated Sandy on that fateful day came with his wife. Dr. Nowel from Cal Tech. Then Sandy’s boss from the dairy, who found Sandy to say “What am I gonna do without you?--but give the Navy hell, kid.” Sandy missed people: Gene Armer and his wife had

sent his good wishes—he even wished his first girlfriend could be here, and Aurora, who had disappeared into Washington DC it seemed, maybe chasing UFOs. Suddenly he missed Ray Zemler like hell... and Elzie, now superintending flight attendants from the United Airlines headquarters, was missing...Joe found Sandy, leaning against a tree.

He offered him a small flask. Sandy nodded but took only a small sip. “So, how you doing Sandy?”

“Fine, I guess...got something—“

“Alexi?” called a voice from behind them. Sandy got up, greeted an older man, and he was brought forward. “General—Joe—this is my uncle, Tymoteusch Komansky. He’s Elzie Komansky’s father—remember, when we were picking up the POWs—“

“Well, this is a pleasure sir,” Joe said, standing up and shaking his hand, and blushing slightly as he recalled his days with his daughter...back in Texas. The gentleman told Joe in slow English how happy he was to meet him; his nephew had spoken highly of his former boss. “I sit and wait,” he then said to them both, but not after kissing Sandy on the cheek and shaking Joe’s hand again. He then moved off and sat in one of the chairs set up on the lawn. Sandy said, “I still can’t believe I have an uncle. And I don’t think I’m a very good nephew.” Tym heard this. “You are fine nephew!” he called, clasping his hands and shaking them. “You make your papa very proud.”

Everything dimmed when a large cloud situated itself between them and the sun. The boughs of the California fir moved about. Tym glanced up and moved to the covered patio.

Sandy then asked Joe about... marriage. Any good tips?

“Well, I can’t supply any particular wisdom about marriage, Sandy. I hope you and Margaret...do okay. It’s a rough world out there.”

“I know you and Ceile have had some...times. I am so sorry about your daughter.”

“Yes...But so tell me...the Navy?”

Sandy explained the Direct Procurement Program. “Commodore Crompton would be proud,” Sandy said, recalling Joe’s final nemesis of the war—and who was on their side. Joe’s final mission for the Eighth was flown in coordination with the Navy, with Crompton in overall command, to destroy what seemed to be the last wolfpack threatening the North Sea. As it turned out, Crompton, after the air forces and the navy forces had successfully interdicted, had gone all out for naval air forces. When he learned that Joe had been air-evacked States in one

day while a ship would have taken three, four days, he realized how the air had it over the sea in several ways. “I understand he was instrumental in the direct procurement program that recruited me—trying to beef up the Navy air forces after a steep falling off after the war--and the whole situation made worse by that jerk Louis Johnson appointed by Truman after the Secretary of Defense Forrestal was turned away...I’ve been warned that the Navy, if Johnson gets Truman convinced, might be completely mothballed.”

“I’ve heard similar rumors and stories,” Joe admitted. “And sounds damned familiar. Some of my time this last four months in the States has been convincing the other branches that NATO and the United Nations need to start working with each other a helluva lot more closely than some kind of friendly rivals jerking themselves off in pissing contests—as well as remaining separate for morale. Johnson wanted to amalgamate all the branches, and God, if that happened...”

“Well, keep it up,” Sandy said.

“Yeah--going to train for jets?”

“If I can deal with the SNJs first!—how about you?”

“I’ve requested jet training,” Joe said, far from sure his request to be granted. Then he thought, this might be a good time to ask him about seeing him in London...oh, no, the guy was about to go the altar...

Sandy heard a note of hope in his voice. Preux then came up as the sun also came out.

“Preachuh’s here. Good time to get some close ups.”

“I’ll get the ladies,” Joe said.

Ceile, followed by Margaret, came out of the house. Joe took each by one hand while the other clutched bouquets. “There, now isn’t that a vision of loveliness?” Before Sandy could agree—he was delighted with Margaret who had already quietly modeled her wedding dress for him, but he was stunned by Ceile, downright statuesque in her satin frock—Mrs. Whitfield came out of the house, fairly shrieking, “You can’t see the bride before the wedding, it’s bad luck—“

“Mama, hush,” Margaret called back.

Elona Whitfield stopped, her mouth flying open. For once, real tears filled her eyes and then she turned and fled. Margaret sighed, stamped her foot with a “Dammit!” and “I’m sorry.”

Preux quickly put them in their places and filmed close ups. Tyler Freds, enjoying his moment in the camera, opened up his book and smiled and read. Sandy and Margaret said, “I do.” Joe and Ceile smiled and nodded in their positions of matron of honor and best man. Tyler Freds

mouthed the words of the service. Preux then lined them up, Joe and Ceile flanking Sandy and Margaret, and had them link arms and smile and laugh. He then let them go, and entered the house. Margaret, to avoid letting the guests see her wedding dress before the big moment, went in through the kitchen entrance, hardly noticing the camera equipment, which Preux was adjusting. She went up the narrow back stairs to find her mother actually dressing, rather than crying. But her face looked a like a fist. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Zip me up please." Her dress was pale pink, with a tailored yoke collar.

"Mama, that's a lovely dress. And so is my gown—and Ceile said to me—she would like to hire you to sew some dresses for her. She said you fitted her to perfection."

"Really?—well, I can do some things right, can't I."

Margaret could not take the time to inquire into her words which touched on something that she could never understand—her mother always held herself as some kind of moral and domestic standard for her family and this was a confession of failure, failure that Margaret and her father always sensed, but never said so to her face for fear of hurting her... "Mama, you've been wonderful, and I know, I know this wedding was fast and furious and then other things came in yesterday, but—Mama, after my honeymoon I am coming home, you know, if that is what is bothering you—"

"I'm so glad you are," she said. "Being alone here with your father—"

Suddenly Margaret demanded, "What has Dad ever done to you? Despite being a police officer he doesn't have a violent bone in his body—"

The upstairs phone rang in the hallway. Margaret answered to talk with her teaching substitute, who was calling about a few details of Margaret's lesson plans. Mrs. Whitfield came out to ask her what it was about. Guests were coming in and somebody trilled up the stairs about when it would be safe to put the chicken salad out—and Mrs. Sliddern, the local piano teacher suddenly arrived, and began playing on the piano, which had been moved to the open French windows for the wedding music, coming and going. She played various love tunes while the guests completed seating.

"It's almost time," called Arnold, up the stairs. He too had been watching the skies as cloud after cloud drifted over.

"Mama, get the folder marked Shelley on my desk," Margaret said.

Elona went into her daughter's room and found five folders. She brought them all to her daughter... "I said just the Shelley," she snapped. "Here it is..." Then her voice died in her throat

as a sudden revelation... It battled for dominance as she clarified a point to her substitute, thanked her...and looked down to the rising level of voices, being invited outside to the chairs...

She handed the folder back to her mother, staring at her. What a time to realize...how could have missed it? Did her father--?

"Mama," she began.

"Where are my two ladies?" called Arnold from down below.

"Coming..."

She came downstairs, pushing aside her revelation...and then wanted to scream and throw her bouquet and stamp on it when she saw Duvina and her husband standing in the living room. Duvina's face resembled a concrete brick, mortar and all. Pole...whateverthehell was standing politely, hat literally in hand, his other hand gripping his wife's elbow. "I beg your pardon, but may we come to your wedding?" he asked, with charm and sincerity. Gordon stood behind them, an index finger digging into his nose.

It was no time to make a fuss. "Of course," she snapped and marched away from them, and took her father's waiting arm.

And it began. And perfectly, wonderfully, the clouds and whatever they might be holding, held off. The California fir tree stilled its branches... And happy the bride the sun shines on...

Harvey, who had been happily impressed into ushering duties, escorted Mrs. Whitfield to the front left row. The wedding march was struck up on the piano and it floated over the heads of the guests...and into the ears of Alexander Komansky, two times before a ready groom and two times disappointed but here he finally was, in his wedding suit, flower in his lapel, coming to the right hand of the altar...with Joe Gallagher by his side. He was so intent on things he did not hear the murmurs of surprise that an Air Force general was his Best Man.

Sandy, waiting for the march to begin marveled...at it all. A miserable orphan in Oakland, all skin and bones and anger, running from school and the cops, and lying to get into the Army. He looked down the short aisle and glimpsed his bride, and her father. My God, how did he find her? She's beautiful, smart, level headed...so, her mother didn't trust him, but her father thought he was okay. And he was stepping up to the plate this time, to train as an officer and a pilot. She would miss him, but she was proud of him. He glanced at Joe. The first time they kind of met Joe had separated him and Vern Chapman. The second time met, he wanted to kill him...and they made it up, became partners, and far far better, friends.

Sandy straightened up when the march began. He came into the here and now, but the brightness of his joy, multiplied when Joe and Ceile, after a period of separation...and silence...had come into his life. And he was getting married...!

Sandy was so filled with joy that tears came to his eyes. He blinked them back.

Ceile preceded Margaret down the aisle. Then came Margaret, on her father's arm. Sandy stepped out as Margaret came forward. Ceile moved to the left, and Joe stayed on the right. Arnold waited.

It was a short, simple ceremony, just long enough to be nice and proper. Tyler Freds addressed them like beloved children, though not cloyingly, telling them that for marriage they needed love, patience, and courage. Sandy really listened to that, and so did Margaret. Finally she handed Ceile her bouquet and she and Sandy took hands. They were asked to promise each other, but he avoided the word "obey." The rings were exchanged. "I now announce that they are husband and wife," said the police chaplain, which he always preferred saying to "man and wife." "You may now kiss."

Margaret raised the modest veil of her hat and Sandy bent down slightly. They kissed modestly, aware of all eyes on them. Margaret whispered, "Thanks, Ho-ney." "Thank you Daisy," he whispered back, but his throat muscles were so choked with joy, he could barely speak.

And, just like that, they walked down the aisle, to the smiles and grins of the guests. Uncle Tym, on the aisle, smiled at them, and shook his clasped hands in love. Margaret bent down and kissed him. Then Sandy saw Duvina and her husband and her kid. Duvina was still furious; her husband was smiling artificially. Gordon had crawled under his chair.

The reception, like the wedding, went very well though swiftly as the newlyweds were racing a real storm; radio reports had the storm moving in more swiftly than expected. Sandy and Margaret stood at the back patio door and shook hands of their guests, and later had little knowledge of doing so. Duvina and her husband came through the line and they shook hands. The guests then advanced into the living room where they helped themselves to salads and finger sandwiches laid out, the glittering silver forks and spoons lined up. The cake was modest tower in the center. The guests were given rented flutes filled with champagne, and a toast was made...by the Best Man. Joe spoke suavely...yet warmly, truly.

"Ladies and gentlemen...I have known the groom, Alexander Komansky for years and no finer friend could be found, in war and in peace. He saved my life as I saved his life. For the latter I am glad because he found a beautiful and wise young woman to be his wife, and for him to be her husband. I raise my glass in a toast of happiness, now, and in the future, and always to Alexander and Margaret Komansky."

Fortunately, nobody saw Gordon cross his eyes and waggle his head. Except Sandy. He was so joyous he actually found it funny.

“Cheers!” cried the guests. “Cut the cake, cut the cake...”

“Your sword,” Joe announced, handing them the knife. Sandy and Margaret commenced with cutting into the bottom of the cake first, never from the top....and then feeding each other. Cameras popped.

By now Mrs. Sliddern, after two flutes of champagne, was trilling out popular tunes and some couples advanced to the back patio to dance. “Come on, you two,” Joe said, guiding them to the patio, letting Ceile take over plating the cake slices. “What would you like to hear?” called Mrs. Sliddern. “They Can’t Take That Away from Me,” they said in unison and she rippled the tune out. Sandy realized he was dancing at his own wedding, his own girl, his own wife...whom nobody would take away from him. Dear God, how wonderful everything was...

He felt a hand on his shoulder as the tune ended. Joe. “The Best Man’s privilege,” he said.

The tune changed to “Just the Way You Look Tonight,” and as Sandy stepped back, he found himself encircled by Ceile. “This is ours,” she said. He took her in his arms and they danced and continued dancing into the next song, “All I Really Want is You,” and then Ceile saw Margaret eyeing her—and him—from across a crowded room, and relinquished him. “Your bride is waiting,” she said.

Sandy looked at Ceile a moment too long and she at him...and he headed immediately to his bride, his wife, and clasped her warmly, and the dancing continued. Margaret felt the joy of relief...and love for this man in her arms, and she in his...and did not see Duvina and her husband off to the side, with Duvina wanting to go, dammit and her husband refusing.

Locked tightly in her husband’s arms, nodded into his shoulder as he whispered, “Isn’t it wonderful, Daisy? I’m so happy.”

**

“Can we help?” Joe asked Mr. and Mrs. Whitfield as they ferried plates and rented flutes to the kitchen for washing. Preux had already dismantled and removed the camera, to Elona’s relief. She was so relieved that the wedding had gone well, she merrily chirped “Thanks, but no! General, it was so nice for you to be Sandy’s Best Man!” Arnold followed Joe, with a warm handshake and some honest pleasure. “Some of the relatives wondered why Margaret was marrying somebody named ‘Komansky.’ You and your stars told ‘em all to go to hell.” “My pleasure,” Joe grinned.

In the next five minutes Margaret, already changed into a departure suit, which her mother had insisted on, threw the bouquet from the stair landing and wished Diana were here to grab it...if Diana would talk to her again. Oh, after the honeymoon. The guests were then given handfuls of rice and waited outside, lining the walk to the street.

At 1:00 sharp, she and Sandy hurried through showers of rice to climb in her car. She somehow caught the sight of Duvina standing there, throwing nothing at all.

Sandy drove them off, then circled about, and dropped Margaret off in the alley behind the house. He then drove to a nearby store to pick up a bag of pre-ordered groceries.

Margaret whirled into the cottage, lined up the luggage, and combed the hat off her hair, wincing at the snagging bobby pins and chuckling at the rice coming off, and found Boblice waiting for her.

"I'm going to kiss the bride," he said, and seized her and forced her down onto the bed. Margaret twisted against him and her mouth tried to bite the hand he clamped on her mouth. His hand twisted into her hair and violently yanked her head back...and then he was pushing her against the closet, his face lowering onto to hers and she felt his thumb on her neck...

"Hey!"

They both saw Gordon at the door staring at them. "Madam," Boblice said, and left, practically knocking the boy over. Gordon looked at Margaret and spit. Oddly she thought that Gordon was not really spitting at her. He left.

She then lunged to the sink to scrub her mouth and struggle against vomiting. She then heard Sandy shout from outside and he came through the door, already loosening his tie to change into his mountain clothing. By now she was removing her suit to don trousers, a plaid shirt, socks and solid sensible shoes. Not now. No. They had three days. Reporting—what had happened, no, nothing had really happened—would rob them of time. It was nothing. Maybe Gordy would tell his mother.

She hung up her dress, stowed her hat and gloves and shoes in a drawer. They went to the car, pulled out of the alley driveway onto the street and found Joe and Ceile waiting in a nearby taxi—yes, they knew of their plans... "Come with us to the Langham for one more drink," Joe called to them. "It's on your way, come on, it's only 1:15."

"Yes, please," echoed Ceile. "God knows when we'll see each other again—after four years, this has gone by too fast."

Margaret knew Sandy was overjoyed to be asked and they nodded. "We won't stay long and we'll drive like hell to the cabin," he promised her.

Sandy and Margaret followed their taxi to the Langham and into the fine old lounge of the massive hotel, built in the days when many a rich easterner came to the Los Angeles for the winters. If anybody noted their casual garb, no one said a thing. Harvey and Melva had already arrived and gone on to their rooms as Melva was tired. The two couples ordered brandies and sat back in damask chairs and chatted and laughed. "Call for Mrs. Komansky," sang out a young man.

"Me?" Margaret demanded. "Who knows I'm here?"

"I told your parents we were going to hijack you two for a drink here," Joe said.

"Oh—maybe it's my substitute—she's pretty nervous." She got to her feet and followed the young man outside of the lounge, hoping that it might be good old Duvina. She would give her an earful...

Sandy drained his brandy and said, "We have to get going--"

"Not yet," Joe interrupted, his happy eyes suddenly hard.

Sandy grew still.

"I'm not calling anybody out," Joe said, his voice equally testy and calm. "But Komansky—I recently heard stories—confirmed by someone I trust—that you and Ceile—"

"Joe!" his wife exclaimed.

Sandy was on his feet. His mouth opened and he got out "I—"

"You what?" Joe demanded.

Sandy saw the bartender watching them. A group of people occupying a booth in the corner became aware of the raised voices. He sat down.

Joe kept his voice low but audible. "I trusted you—and her—and I got shit in return, so I understand. I thought you two hadn't seen each other in years, unless—unless certain absences on your part Ceile...led to things I can't even think about."

"Sir, sir--I never—she never—how could either of us lie to you?"

"Blood under the bridge, Komansky, but if you ever—if she ever—"

"Is all well sir?" A manager, with silver wings of hair over his ears, suddenly appeared, somewhat separating them, while charmingly inquiring, if he could help in some problem.

"In a pig's eye—"

“Sir, don’t—these are lies, whoever...” Sandy looked at Ceile, who, to his horror, dropped her eyes as if in admission...

“Get on your honeymoon, you bastard,” Joe said in a deadly voice. “And I never want to see you or hear of you ever again.”

Margaret was returning, saying that the line was dead and she could not call back when Sandy, alone, met her. “Let’s go,” Sandy said, taking her elbow. “I’ve said our goodbyes already—“

“Yes, yes of course,” she said. But she had wanted to say a proper goodbye to Joe Gallagher who was, she thought, the beau-ideal of a military officer...handsome, charming, courtly, and despite always enjoying dancing with Sandy, Joe had danced with her with such easy authority. As for Ceile...well, she was glad to have met her, grateful for her stepping in as Matron of Honor, and glad to be parted from her. She sensed that Ceile did not really approve of her, and that look she gave Sandy when they danced... They took off out the doors, got into the car and Sandy shot them forward into traffic.

Within the hour, Joe and Ceile solemnly left their rooms, suitcases in hand. They proceeded to the elevators and Harvey’s voice stopped them. “Hey, you two—are you leaving already?”

“Orders,” Joe said.

Harvey could see they were clearly in a hurry, and their faces had “objective” stamped on them. But his news trumped their orders. “When we got back to our room, Melva had a phone call—from her doctor—Joe, Ceile, Melva’s pregnant!”

They both stared at him. Joe said, “Harvey, congratulations—tell your wife—“

“I know she wasn’t feeling well—she called it a bug she couldn’t shake. She saw a doctor without telling me—I wondered. But I sure didn’t--”

Ceile then threw her arms around Harvey. “Congratulations to you both—so much. This is wonderful.”

“Snow on the roof, fire in the furnace,” Harvey said, wiping his eyes. “Look, I know you two are in a hurry, so git.” They shook his hand and sent their best to Melva.

Outside, a car picked them up and drove them to a private field near Burbank airport. All the way they held hands, for a variety of reasons. They waited for two hours...endless hours, never easy despite all the waiting they had done in their lives...finally climbed into a Bell helicopter, roomy enough to hold nearly twenty men, but there were only six on board, including the pilot who never said a word.

The helicopter rose and waggled to the northeast to chop away. They could only hope to outrun the gray heaves of clouds that were already distributing rain...

**

Margaret's car, with Sandy at the wheel, negotiated curves of Highway 395 which took them into the flanks of the Sierras. He turned onto a narrower road and the upward spiral became serious...as did the weather. The storm was moving in, with Pacific ferocity.

Pulling the car to the side of the road and parking, Sandy consulted the map with a flashlight. They were an hour away, if they could keep up their speed. But the road was winding, the drop offs were ferocious, the rain became sleet, became snow...and Sandy dallied with the idea of heading the car off a turn...and he could, the way sick angry tears kept blurring his vision.

He then put his head and sobbed on the steering wheel. Why did things go shit? Why?

How could accuse of such things, so violently wrong?

Margaret did not budge. As they pulled away from the Langham, she had inquired if something was bothering him and he said, "Let's get out of Los Angeles first." She nodded, a crease between her eyes...and to his surprise and then relief, she was soon nodding...and drifted off. If she had been able to pry some words out of him...what would he have told her?

He wiped his eyes and drove off again...and wondered if he should have stopped at one of those small lodges in the foothills for the night. The cold was crawling into the car, night was upon them, and the windshield wipers were beating, beating, beating, beating... He stopped at the sign of a closed gas station and café. It had been hand-marked on the map: "Ned's: Eats and Gas." The lodge turn-off was only a mile away.

He sat for a moment, the car's headlights poking into the grainy dark. He thought again about giving up. He just might if he were by himself. But Margaret did not deserve to die because of lies, lies, lies! Who had spread such a story? How the hell did Joe believe it? He shifted into gear and drove on, slowly, slowly—he found the stone pillar which marked the road to the cabin. He cautiously rolled down a quarter of a mile through a tunnel of trees caked down with snow...come on, come on, come...and at last, the place appeared in the headlights.

He stopped the car. "We're here," Sandy announced. "Come on, let's go, can't sleep here."

Margaret stirred as his hand jiggled her shoulder. She opened her eyes with effort. "Yes, yes...God it's cold..." She seized hold of her suitcase and another bag while Sandy seized his own and the bag of groceries; no time for chivalry, they had to get into the house as the snow went from extremely businesslike to fierce, to deadly. He turned off the headlights and they

floundered toward the door. Light was coming through the lozenge shaped panes of glass. No time to question.

The door opened when he slammed his hand on the latch. No time for carrying in the bride. They blundered in, dropping their suitcases. Sandy struggled to close and latch the door, clutching the bag of groceries.

“My heavens!” Margaret had ventured beyond the foyer into a high, warm, beautiful chamber lighted by candles in hurricane lamps set on a library table. In the enormous hearth, a gas fire flickered. On the table, two glasses flanked a decanter of brandy. “It’s a palace!” She called “Hello! Hello!?”

Silence.

Sandy was silent himself. It had been his prison once. Crusard’s cabin, Krak des Chevaliers. And somebody had prepared the place for them. Who the hell...

Margaret toasted herself at the fire place and he joined her. She hopelessly yawned. “Oh, it must be the altitude,” she said.

“Would you like something to eat?” he said, the bag of groceries still clamped to his side.

“I’d rather go to bed...and sleep...” He placed the bag of groceries on the floor and steered her up the beautiful wooden staircase. When they reached the landing, she kissed him after yawning. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not as if this is our first time together.”

“But it’s our first night as a married couple...”

“Sweetie, we have a lot of nights ahead as a married couple...”

He took her to an open door which emitted an apron of soft light on the polished oak floors. A candle in a hurricane lamp glowed on the dresser. The bed, a huge canopied affair, was turned down, its sheets gleaming pink. Room service. “Ohhh,” she sighed, heading towards it. She lay down with a sigh. He helped her undress and then slipped her nearly nude form under the comforter. She was asleep before he reached the door.

Alone, he descended the steps, suddenly catching the smell of cooking. Taking up the sack of groceries, he went into the kitchen and found a pot of stew gently simmering on the gas range. Rolls were on the warming shelf. Leaving the kitchen, he then saw a dining table laid with napkins, silver, and goblets. Seven places.

He carried the luggage upstairs, used the bathroom, checked on his wife, and finally began searching for whoever the hell the host was.

Then he heard a radio crackling... in the kitchen. He went to it, efficiently turned it on. "Here. Over."

A thread voice came over. "Turn on every light on the ground floor. Quick. Over."

He was smart enough to obey. He located every switch he could find and thank goodness, every light seemed to work although he could hear a generator whining. He returned to the radio. "All lights on. Over."

"We—" Nothing else.

After a terrible half hour, he saw a light careening over the darkness below and the grinding of an outboard motor. Within minutes, five dark figures were hurrying up the steps and they stumbled in through French doors he opened and pressed closed—and then saw a sixth lunge onto deck and he opened the doors again. The figure moved past him, luggage clamped under his arms and in his hands. He went upstairs.

Sandy peered at two of his...guests. He knew—from their height, their looks, their manners...who at least two of them were.

Joe peeled off his winterwear trenchcoat and turned around to confront him but with a face utterly impassive.

Sandy spoke, hoarsely. "Joe—what the hell—you accused me things I never did—would—shit that Troper said, wrote to us—you know—you know—" He put his hand to his mouth. Saliva was dripping down his chin. Better than tears dripping down his cheeks though they were rising, invading... He looked at Ceile and then the damned things spewed from his eyes.

"Sorry. It was a put-up job. It may help to know....that I am reporting to Creighton."

Sandy stepped forward to deck Joe—but his curled fists stayed at his sides. He then raised his right hand...and lightly slapped his friend on the cheek, twice.

Ceile firmly guided them both to one of the two sofas and made them sit. "You're lucky you're not in the Navy, yet. Otherwise, I could court martial you for striking a superior officer." Joe's voice was jocular, but it was the kind of voice people used in a sick room.

"I may yet."

"Enough," said a voice he had heard little less than a year ago.

Villda and Dryatkin were emerging from their coats and mufflers. Even here, dark glasses.

Joe acknowledged them with a look. "Sandy, I have to disappear for a while. That's not an easy thing for a brigadier general to do--"

"You working for them, with them?" Sandy said.

"No.

"What the hell has that to do with you accusing me and your wife--?"

"Listen up sergeant, lieutenant, ensign, whatever. That little incident at the lounge was carefully set up. We even made sure your bride was drawn away--"

He got it, in a flash. "Margaret was slipped a mickey wasn't she?"

"She will sleep until sometime in the morning," Ceile said. "We will try to be gone by then."

Joe spoke quickly. "The place was nearly empty. The Langham has a reputation for elegance that would quickly make somebody interfere with any kind of confrontation. And then try to hush up what happened. But rumors will get out and into the ears of certain people, allies and otherwise. 'Say, Joe, you haven't taken a *real* vacation since December 1941 and it's time you take it easy. A desk drawer reprimand and some easy duty.' Maybe a leave. A long one."

Sandy had never heard Joe's voice strike such tones: fierce, mocking, inquiring. He had never sounded so much like Savage, he thought, taking hold of a situation and placing it firmly in his court, his field.

All through this, Villda and Dryatkin were warming themselves, listening, watching.

"Mulligan stew."

They all swung their heads to see the other man, decked out in an apron, suddenly made the announcement from the kitchen door. "Served in two minutes. I'm sure you're all hungry."

Sandy said, "Tib?" Tib nodded at him. The last time he had seen him...was in the company of this Villda and Dryatkin.

Sandy then saw Dr. Crusard beside him, uncorking a bottle of wine. He set it down on the laid table and then went about switching the lights off and the angry sound of the generator died down. The situation seemed less threatening in the light of the candles safe in their hurricane lamps.

They stirred toward the table. All of them. Somewhat sheepishly, including Villda and Dryaktin, they all sat down at the neatly laid table. Tib joined them, after serving. Crusard played the host, pouring wine. They silently consumed their dinner, which was tasty despite being not quite identifiable in terms of its ingredients, but that was Mulligan stew. In some ways, it symbolized the situation.

Joe and Ceile and Sandy sat opposite the two men. Joe, a little mockingly, raised his glass of red wine to them; the two men in black toasted him back. Tib ate, quietly, but watched. The two men ate and drank sparingly and silently noticed was that they both consumed pills with their meal. The basket of rolls went around, smeared with butter and honey. They finished with cups of coffee, laced with brandy. Crusard helped with the serving, and looked neither quizzical nor embarrassed. Sandy was glad the man was alive. He had been good to him.

Joe, Sandy saw, kept flicking glances at the unknown man. They matched his own glances.

Sandy, feeling better for a decent meal—he had not really eaten anything in the last 24 hours save a bolted sandwich and the bite of cake that Margaret fed him, neither of which he tasted—finally looked at his old...friends, and his two acquaintances, and his former professor and mentor of sorts.

Finally, Joe said, “Okay, we’ve taken communion. Now what?”

Villda, who was hunched over his coffee, looked up, seemingly provoked. Sandy shrunk into himself, though his face did not change expression. Dryatkin sat back.

Tib noisily rattled plates as he removed them, and went into the kitchen.

The grandfather clock, at the top of the stairs, chimed twelve times, each sweet rich bong a ripple into the tension below. Ceile made a sudden ripple herself. “I’m going to take a bath and go to bed,” she said, suddenly. “I’m exhausted.”

The two men actually stood up as she left. “Good night,” called Tib, removing the last of the silverware. He added, somewhat pointedly, “See you in the morning.”

Crusard spoke. “Take a candle with you; there’s no electricity upstairs.” Ceile took one of the hurricane lamps from the library table and ascended upstairs, looking, Joe thought, like a militant Florence Nightingale.

Crusard left the table, sat down in a winged chair near the fire, lighted a pipe, and then drifted off. Tib, in the kitchen, began the dishes. Sandy, feeling like he had little to lose, asked Joe about his wedding gift to them...Joe, grinning in a rather strained way, told him it was Irene’s present to them.

The two men, dark glasses firmly on their faces, sat down on the two sofas facing the fire. Tib came out of the kitchen and spoke to them. They nodded, apprehensively. Villda spoke, and the Tib nodded. Joe, quietly watching this...wondering if they would finally learn how these men and Creighton had hooked up.

Ceile found their room by their luggage. It was beautifully appointed, though musty with being long closed up. She then found two hurricane lamps and lighted the candles within. Next she found the bathroom, and accustomed to taking pleasure when she could, was overjoyed to find gallons of warm water sluicing out of the faucet, which explained the whine of generators. This so-called cabin was the result of a lot of money. Glowing with warmth, wrapped in a towel and returning to her room, she saw Margaret at an open door, staring at her. "What the hell?"

Swift as thought, Joe and Sandy came up the stairs. Sandy came to his wife, her eyes loose from the sedative and heavy sleep. "Daisy, come on," he said, taking her arms. She swayed in his grasp, and tried to close the door on him but he pushed it open, stepped in, forcing her back. "Get the rest of your sleep. It's the middle of the night..."

"I don't feel very well. Am I seeing things?"

"It's the altitude. Go back to sleep. You'll feel better in the morning. Come on," he said, leading her to the bed. He got into it and pulled her in.

"Yes...all right." She drifted off as he held her...and he finally dozed off from exhaustion. Ceile, from her door watched Joe and Sandy turn and descend the steps.

In her room, Ceile put on fresh underwear, and slipped back into her trousers and shirt. Socks, but not her shoes. Not knowing what else to do...she lay down on the bed, and pulled up a comforter and let the last several hours travel through her head.

She hadn't known what was going to happen but knew some game had been afoot. Joe had called her in San Antonio and informed her they were going to Sandy and Margaret's wedding, uninvited. When she protested...he said, "I'm through with this separation. We're going." At least she convinced him to write a letter and send it airmail before they departed. The wedding went well...it was so good to see Sandy, and his bride...and with Frankie as their son, the sting of Bryn was now a memory...not just a memory, but a memory.

But then, as they drove to the Langham, with Sandy and Margaret following them, Joe told her what they had to do...but not why. She then knew that Joe was pouring pre-measured liquid into Margaret's brandy as she distracted Margaret and her new husband.

As they drove to the airfield where transportation awaited them, Joe told her the rest: they were flying to Sandy and Margaret's honeymoon cabin...and there meet with...whom they had

to meet with and why he had treated Sandy so miserably... which was part of the mission he was soon undertaking. A meeting that had been set up by Tib and Creighton. He had met these two men before...in the diner, on the way home with Frankie...

Ceile held onto her anger and her tongue. She had to.

They and their luggage were placed in a Bell helicopter in Los Angeles, and carried, heart stoppingly, into rain and then into snow. The pilot set the heavy Bell job down in the middle of a field rimmed with lights scarcely to be seen. He started buttoning up the machine for the night after they stumbled out into the snowing night, looking at a light coming toward them. A man holding the light met and hustled them into a Jeep which already had three people in it.

After a drive beyond belief, they were left off, led down a pier and into a boat that zoomed across the lake brittle with ice. Then they walked into Valhalla, where Sandy had brought his bride, expecting an isolated honeymoon...and she finally saw, again, the two men she had first glimpsed in in a diner, back in December....

Joe then came into their room. She could see, even the quiet light, how set his face was.

“So your reputation is pretty much in the toilet...why? What’s the mission?”

“Yes,” Joe told his wife. The single syllable covered a lot of ground. Without being ordered, Ceile braced, and as always hoped for the best, expected the worst. At least, their limbo would end. They had been in one for a month now, and how tough it had been to keep up a front for Irene, and especially for Frankie whose need for reassurance was enormous.

Joe and Ceile then occupied the bed; Joe loosened his clothing and took his shoes off, but left it at that as he stretched out beside her. Then he removed his GI sidearm and laid it on the night table and she covered them both with the afghan. “Aren’t they missing you,” Ceile murmured, as she tucked her head into the favorite spot, between his head and his chest. “Let ‘em,” said Joe. Despite everything...they drifted off themselves, and for a few blessed hours the house was quiet. Events, if events there were...were deferred. When Joe began stirring, Ceile asked him point blank...what was the mission?

He told her.

Around seven, Sandy tapped on and then eased the door open. “Good morning.”

“I’ll check on Margaret, if you wish,” Ceile said, getting to her feet.

“Yes please.” She left. Joe found his shoes, avoiding Sandy’s eyes. He then stood up and immediately holstered the side-arm. The way the two men, the two old friends, the two

keepers of secrets looked at each...revealed amazement they were still alive, fear of the two men downstairs, glad that each other was engaged in all this...

Sandy's words were light, his voice taut. "Don't get me wrong Joe, when you are leaving?"

"When it clears. Word is that it will this morning. I'm sorry about this."

"Really?"

"If you were in my shoes...how would you feel about crashing my honeymoon in London back in '44?"

"Like shit."

"Triple that and more and you know how we feel." He found his comb and arranged his chestnut hair, increasingly graying. He met Sandy's eyes in the mirror he stood before. "Sorry for such a shivaree."

"I've heard the word but what is it?"

"You remember *Oklahoma*?—when Judd got stabbed?—he took advantage of a shivaree that Curly's friends were giving him."

"Yeah."

"Old time fun. The groom's friends did their best to keep the groom and the bride apart."

"Why?"

"For the sheer hell of it. But we're not here for sheer hell of it."

Sandy brought up a small grin. "You know, if it makes you feel any better—"

"Can that."

"All right...but honestly, Joe, Margaret and I have already been...intimate. What really mattered is having some time alone before I go to Pensacola." Sandy spoke firmly, although the tone of his voice indicated he knew they were both whistling in the dark...

"That matters too. Maybe a lot more."

"Joe, knowing that you know them—makes me less lonely."

"I don't know them—if you refer to the two...men...downstairs. I met them, suddenly, in a diner, before Christmas. I'd been seeking them out. They finally showed up...how about you?"

"I met them the first time, in Poland. I got sent there...was told not to say anything, but hell, now...we were seeking out some kind of artifact that seemed the key to something. It turned out to be a sword's hilt—and then we ran for our lives when some kind of Soviet patrol rushed us. We—I—were taken to some hut where I handed over the sword's hilt to these men."

There was noise in the hallway. Joe did not address the issues Sandy had suddenly inserted into his life. "I'll be blunt as hell. Maybe those two guys got us all together like this in order to silence us. Permanently."

"Would Creighton...order such a thing?"

The door was tapped on, followed by Crusard's voice: "Breakfast is served."

Opening the door, Joe asked conversationally, "How's the weather?"

"Predictions it will clear by mid-morning."

Sandy said, calmly, "Joe, Dr. Crusard was one of my professors at USC. He became involved with the henges."

"And in subsequent contact with those two men?" Joe asked, equally calmly.

Crusard nodded and said, "I've been working with certain engineers in the east, trying to understand what we can about the henge."

Tib politely called up the stairs that breakfast was ready. Ceile followed them. Margaret was still sleeping, she said.

Oatmeal was served, and then scrambled eggs and ham. Crusard, without an ounce of wounded pride, filled their cups with coffee. They ate, with the two men once more sparingly, with a variety of pills.

Sandy ate his breakfast and drank his coffee without tasting either one. He had frequently done the same back at the mess halls at Archbury, just filling his stomach. For all he knew, his guts and the food in them might be obliterated within hours. Joe and Ceile ate, but they were just pushing food into their mouths. Crusard only drank coffee.

Villda finished, used his napkin, and then started to speak with an honest to god clearing of the throat--

Then they heard, from the upper landing, "Good morning--?"

They looked up. Margaret stood on the landing, hands planted on the rail, and looked down at them all. “Morning sweetheart,” Sandy announced, standing up. Silence. “I’ll...get dressed,” she said, and turned away. Ceile then asked, “Tib, will you fix me a tray of food, please?”

“Gladly.” He did so, in record time.

One more deferral? A few more minutes. Joe drank his coffee, daring to look at Villda. He hoped what he thought he saw was true. A kind of softening somehow on that drawn face as he observed Sandy staring wistfully up to the landing where his lovely young new wife had appeared. Crusard nervously lighted his pipe.

Tib, face impassive, waited.

Ceile ascended the steps, carrying a wooden tray of breakfast complete with napkin and silver. Knowing she was being observed, she put a kind of regal sweep into her steps, showing them that she didn’t care...she doubted if they believed it.

Balancing the tray on her left arm, she knocked on the door of the room Margaret had withdrawn to.

Margaret opened it. She looked about sixteen years old. Ceile moved in on Margaret, to make her step back, and let her in. She put the tray down and turned to face the young woman—but memories of her own honeymoon, in London, with Joe...blessedly alone in their hotel room, from which they had not stirred for thirty six hours and a dozen condoms later...interfered. But oh, this poor kid...just married, then sedated—and waking up with a house full of people. But maybe there was something worse and she had to prepare her, in some way.

“Have some coffee. A few sips and a few bites of toast. It’ll stimulate you, get rid of the drug.”

“Drug?—no wonder...”

“Eat first. Then ask questions.”

After a few cautious bites, Margaret eagerly ate the scrambled eggs and the oatmeal. Her face filled out with color and alertness, and she looked at Ceile. “So talk.”

“About what?”

“I know things. Those two men...I don’t know ‘em from Adam but they’re part of what Sandy is in, and I guess you and your husband are too. If you drugged me to keep me out of it, I guess that’s moot.” She found a tissue and blew her nose.

Ceile kept herself from pausing...and being not exactly pleased at her nerve. “You’re right. Let’s go down and meet them. Come on—take a quick shower—brush your teeth.” In a few minutes,

Margaret had showered and stepped out into the bedroom. Her face was beautiful, but set. She rapidly dressed and then pulled her hair back into a pony tail. Ceile said, "You can't look scared."

She said this as she covered up some surprise...when Margaret pulled her hair back, Ceile saw a mark on her temple. Similar to hers. Too very similar...

Margaret nodded, wordlessly. With some food in her system, Boblice's assault—yesterday afternoon—reappeared in her memory. Connected? How could it be...or not be.

A knock came on the door. "Ladies?"

Margaret opened the door to their husbands. Both women looked feckless, startled...a bit nettled... Joe suddenly recalled Irene and Ursula. "Margaret and I were getting to know each other."

They all descended. The weather predictions were right; the snow was abating and some weak sunshine was in evidence.

Both men rose, staring, immaculate, faces immobile—but they proved rather courtly as the missing member of the party came forward. "Madam," Vilda said, taking Margaret's bravely extended hand. He then straightened up and like an arrow, his eyes went to Joe's.

Challenging him. Joe met it, twelve o'clock high. "You've treated us with reasonable courtesy. You're frightening, but for good effect. But let's take the masks off and talk turkey, okay?"

Silence.

Joe urged them. "Tell us so we can do our best helping you. Or tell us, and then kill us. And—you wouldn't dare. Too many questions."

The two men, without moving a muscle, assented. "But these," said the older man, pointing at his dark glasses, "do not come off."

"Of course," Joe said. Then he said, curtly, if sincerely, "Thank you."

More silence. "Well?" Joe demanded.

"Yes, we were ordered to kill you."

"Why?" Joe asked. "What is Creighton thinking of?"

Tib, who was standing by Joe, whispered to him.

Joe then spoke. "This is a case of security—not crime—but beyond what anybody has experienced. Creighton once expected me to stand silently by while my men flew their missions with sabotaged ammunition—this is more of the same...there must be even larger issues, here..."

Pause...which grew longer. Nobody dared move a muscle, even blinking an eyelid seemed a trigger.

"Perhaps disobeying the order is your test," Sandy whispered.

Then, Villda bent his head down, slightly. "An officer can question orders if he finds them morally wrong," he said.

"Morality?" Dryatkin barked. "We speak of security—"

"The need of security is destroying.... Dryatkin...we can't do this." He turned his back on his partner, and stared out the window.

"We must! We owe it to him!"

"We owe him a lot, but not this. But I refuse—no, I will not follow his orders. And if he calls that a betrayal, well, let him." Dryatkin looked at their intended victims. "Do it yourself, go on," Villda said. When Dryatkin continued to peer at him, he said, rather gently, "You were in a camp—as a prisoner and later as a guard. You saw death and murder—but you said you never once killed, directly or indirectly. Well, I have. No more. Not even for him and all his demands for our loyalty. Not this. And yes, I think there is value in what was proposed: by not killing, we have proven ourselves."

"What do we do?" Dryatkin demanded. "We cannot—go to him and say—"

"Yes, we will. And if he doesn't like it, then to hell with him."

Dryatkin clearly did not believe this. He then asked: "What do we do with...them?"

"You can trust us," Joe said, snapping. "But in return, we need to trust you."

"I agree," said Tib. His eyes met their dark glasses, head on.

Villda said, "Always audacious. How do we trust you, and you trust us?"

Joe took a deep steadying breath... "Be honest with us. I got men to fly into hell by being honest with them. Lie, obfuscate, and you lose them!—God, how I know..."

“Do I feel tension rising...?” Margaret spoke up, her voice making a dent in the silence of a stand-off. She then said, “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to make light...”

“Well, what’s the fate of the planet after all?” Villda asked, a touch lightly.

“What is ours?” Dryatkin demanded.

“At times I don’t care. I was on the verge of death once, and sometimes I wish I had stayed the course. Sometimes I’m glad I didn’t. I will try my best to make him understand that we can’t do this alone, and we need allies, allies that we can trust. I know I can trust you. Ladies and gentlemen—shall we have some brandy to seal our alliance?”

“Do we dare?” Dryatkin asked.

“Drinking brandy, taking a chance with these people, or telling the truth?” Villda asked.

“Perhaps we’re dead men already,” his partner said. “Both of us...almost once were, not once, but several times.”

Joe listened to this, wondering if this were really Creighton they were talking about. The man had a cruel streak, which a man needed for the frequently violent work he had to do...Joe recalled how Creighton angrily silenced Joe, threatened him—when he raised his voice to Creighton as his men were being sentenced to death with sabotaged ammunition.

Crusard poured brandy into glasses and served them on a platter—with shaking hands. Margaret sipped on hers, with a tight face, but she was the first to answer with a “Yes,” when Villda asked...had any of them read Milton’s *Paradise Lost*?

“Milton related the war in heaven between the unfaithful and the faithful angels. Something like that happened on this earth some eight thousand years ago, but these were no angels. They were beings from far away who came to earth to study it.”

“From outer space?” Joe asked, quietly but could not keep the scorn out of his voice.

“Their planet of origin is not ours, if that sounds less like Buck Rogers. Their original mission was to study evolving species to understand their own evolution, and to gather evidence, samples, and then leave. These beings—I don’t know what they call themselves--their biology was similar to human beings because after some issues, they adapted to carbon-based life systems. They were to be here for a set time. But the beauty of the earth seduced them...” He gestured out the picture window where, with perfect timing, great silver gray clouds forked to let frigid sun gleam down on the dark forests. Sandy recalled being on the dark slope, in white snow, and a tangle of color in the north had made this man pause...and how he spoke of “not seeing the deer in the park...always there, and I never saw them...but one day, I came to one, eye to eye...”

“And they were fascinated by this two-legged upright creature that despite being closely related to fellow species in its genus, had leaped enormously ahead—language, logic, cooperation, art, technology. Despite a scheduled departure, they decided to stay longer and then longer. Whether they ever intended to return to their home became moot when beliefs diverged. From what I can understand their own kind of Hitler rose up and attempted to convince them to create their own empire on earth, and use human beings as intelligent slaves. But many wished to leave human beings alone and demanded departure. Those who wanted to enslave earth vanished, presumably to pursue their plans. Those who stayed behind could not, in all conscience, leave humans to be enslaved by these others. So both sides stayed and learned...about the terrible futility and equally terrible utility of war. Neither side won, nor lost. But they damaged themselves and neither side could leave. They are still with us.”

“Eight thousand year old aliens?” Joe asked.

“Their descendants.”

“You’ve met them?”

“Yes.”

“Who is ‘them’ exactly?”

“Descendants of those who wanted to leave the earth and its inhabitants alone.”

“And what kind of... employment?”

“To help them recover the full technology of their henge. If they can, then they could depart for their home planet.”

“So it came from them,” Sandy said.

“It was—is—the one piece of technology that adapted well if not perfectly to earth’s electro-magnetic fields. Do you wish to know more?”

“Hell, we’re this far in...” Joe said and then made himself stop and look at the five other people. Sandy’s face was drawn and expectant; Ceile was cautious and Margaret’s face was hard to determine. But she was game.

“The henge was a source of power to them—generating power that is, the power akin to our electricity. They used it produce food, for mobility, for powering their engines, for maintaining themselves with great sophistication at a time when human beings were still living in tents or brush shelters.”

“And then came the troubles you spoke of,” said Margaret.

“The good side, that is, the ones that wished not to harm human beings, apparently possessed data to build and repair a henge for their purposes. The ones they fought, the so-called evil ones, had lost data or the

knowledge of how to keep their own henge in repair and pursued the 'good ones' to kill them, steal their henge. About eight hundred years ago, in desperation, these people carried their henge and their knowledge away. The henge, according to the information we have processed, was hidden. Recorded data was broken up and scattered to keep it away from those who would use the henge's power against them and against human beings."

"Then how did the Nazis build their henges?" This was Sandy's question.

Crusard, fairly silent until then took up the story. "Incomplete documents were found in Baku, in the archives of a Greek Orthodox church. Certain principles were deduced and published by Illych Mdraniewicz. It might have all ended as crackpot shit, except Hitler sought exotic shit and so millions of marks were poured into them to create a weapon. But, since the documents were incomplete, little came out of the eight that were erected."

"How do you know this?" Joe demanded.

"I was drawn into building them with a man called Claud Walkert. Actually, he was Otto Heinzma."

When Joe did not recognize the name, Sandy did, and Villda, Dryatkin and Tib all nodded.

"Eight?" Joe asked. This was four more than they knew about. Four more to try to destroy.

"Five henges are confirmed; the other three are not yet located. There's a rumor of there being a ninth one, somewhere in Asia."

"What about the bells—the glockes?" Sandy demanded. "I had a kind of hand in those—"

"A Nazi invention," Crusard said. "Pretty remarkable too. But these glockes could only concentrate electromagnetic power in only about three of the eight henges—and that came about when the henges were triangulated—but only ineffective bolts of light were produced."

"My God...the foo fighters?" Joe asked.

"Exactly."

"And then?" Joe asked.

Villda, who had taken another pill, said, "The Nazis failed with the henges. But steps had to be taken."

"What steps?"

"To find a henge that the survivors preserved, used, and then finally hid. This was learned about when Mara, Illych's daughter, finally gave up documents her father entrusted her with. Komansky, you were the Heir Commenes that finally created a trailhead." Before Sandy could speak, Villda continued. "Alexis Commenes

extended his protection to them. Frankly, he probably had certain motives, but he helped them carry their—as far as I can understand their terms, he helped them to take their henge to an obscure location for hiding. We thought we were close to finding it there in early 1949, in Poland.”

“All we found was a sword’s hilt,” Sandy said.

Yes, and earlier, you helped to get on to Otto Heinzma...who is now dead, overseas, though by murder or suicide, we are not sure. Also from Crusard we learned about that inoperable henge that he and Heinzma built, not far from here, which is still of value to help us better understand the thing. And so...here we are.”

“And where are we?” Ceile asked this question. Her sharp eyes and sense told her something, and she enunciated it. “You don’t know either, do you?”

Joe spoke when they were silent. “I—we, meaning Komansky and I—were once down in Russia. Between the lines. All plans shot to hell. We were making it up, minute by minute. We were terrified.”

Tib spoke, loudly. “That is how General Creighton is proceeding as well.”

“We want to help you. And yeah, we want to live, even with obligations that we don’t know. Worse, you don’t know, do you? One of the worst aspects of the war—was not knowing what the ultimate objective was. Nearly broke me.”

“We’ll die,” Dryatkin hissed. “We’ll die if we start asking questions—“

“That can be avoided,” said Villda. “As well as proffering gratefulness to our...guests, for listening to us, trying to understand us and our agenda.”

“Grateful?” Joe said.

“Yes, we’re grateful.” Villda hunched forward. “But I once knew a man who was grateful to me. He told me so. But he also made it clear he was not my worshipper. I liked that. We need to tell our—employer—that we are grateful to him, and understand our obligations—but we are their employees, not their slaves. And comrade—I guess I’d rather face my own death than take the lives of others.”

“And I want some damned proof.” This came from Ceile. She stood up and looked at the two men, and then at everybody else. “Look, this is some story. And you got me ready to pee...well, you got me scared. But it all sounds pretty fantastic to me—“

“Madam--” snarled Dryatkin.

“And what about these people from outer space? I’d like some proof on that too.” This was Joe speaking.

“You have our word,” said Villda. “And that’s all I can offer.”

“By extension, Creighton’s word,” Tib said.

Joe nodded.

“And the weather is right for take-off.” Tension flaked away, slid away...but then coiled up and would not quite dissipate, but they were alive. Released. Excused...but on the hook. An enormous hook. Problems had not been solved, but had multiplied. But good problems to tackle and solve.

Villda stood up and turned to Tib, waiting, watchful. Eyes wide. “You’re a clever man,” Villda said. “Food and companionship...and brandy...rather defused the situation. And Madam,” he said to Ceile, “you voiced some issues we have long carried with us. And you,” he said to Joe, “make us face the fact that we need to proceed by trusting each other.”

Joe nodded...but the at times cloudy dimensions of trust...had never seemed so cloudy.

“Sir,” said Sandy. “As long as we’re being honest...”

Villda and Dryatkin waited.

“Sir, sirs...we, Calman and I did not follow through with your orders about the other...man with us...”

Dryatkin said “What?” and then stepped back when Villda put a restraining hand on his arm. “Interesting news. But, uh, where is he?”

“Keeping to himself. He promised to stay that way. We told him he’d better.”

“I’m glad he’s alive.” Villda seemed genuinely glad for a moment. “Well, it’s time to go.” They all turned to the act of departure, a bit distractedly. Villda then said, to Sandy and Margaret, “Not you. You stay here. Complete your honeymoon. It’s the least we can do.”

“Thank you,” Sandy whispered. Margaret suddenly left his side and went upstairs.

Sandy pretended not to notice...particularly when he found Crusard smiling at him, and taking a moment of seeming privacy. “I know you haven’t particularly enjoyed your second visit to my palace in the Sierras.”

“It’s beautiful, sir.”

“Yes. This is actually the third time you have been a guest of sorts, of mine. When you and that young woman were returned...from Mexico...you were staying at Bartonair. That, to a degree, has been requisitioned too.”

Sandy didn't take the time to question the wisdom of his question. "Sir, was there a man there, tall, blond...with a moustache?"

Crusard didn't answer. He then took an envelope from the inside of his jacket. "Say, I need to give you my wedding present..." He handed it to Sandy.

"We're getting our luggage," Joe announced from the first floor landing.

"And I'll say our goodbyes to Margaret," Ceile said. She went upstairs. She knocked and entered the room without permission. Margaret was pressed against the frigid gray window, obviously crying. Ceile shut the door quietly, waited a moment, and then went to her, saying "Come on, kid, it's okay, including some tears."

"You're the okay one," Margaret said, getting a shuddering hold of herself. Her arms were tightly folded, her fingernails digging through her shirt into her skin.

"Look, you were the soul of courage down there—"

"That was an act—"

"You think we weren't putting on an act either? The only difference is that we're more accustomed to it. It's like armor—after a while you get faster at putting it on. It's artificial. But it keeps you going. Well," she said with true cheerfulness, "we're on our way. It's wonderful meeting you Margaret, and sorry it could not have been better. Just better. But we're all on hooks of some sort."

"Yes, I guess we are." Margaret left the window, sat down on the bed.

Ceile smiled at her agreement, and spoke encouraging words to the scared little lady. "Look, you've got to enjoy your honeymoon. Sandy's going to Pensacola. As an English teacher, you recognize 'carpe diem'? Seize the day?"

"I didn't think my marriage would be like that."

"It has its compensations. Seized days can glitter like jewels. Believe me, I know."

Margaret chose to ignore a certain degree of smugness in Ceile's voice as she advised her how to have a happy marriage. "What Sandy told me, what little he did...he was being honest with me and it was kind of exciting. Now it's frightening."

"Well, you held up. You'll be fine. Be brave. If you ever need my help, well, you just call."

Margaret nodded. Despite everything, she did not like Ceile's rather patronizing tone. She turned to leave, not bothering to ask for a phone number. "One more thing, please."

“Yes?”

Margaret looked at her, directly, with some school teacher firmness... and took her advice to be brave. “Uh, I want you to stay away from Sandy.” When Ceile raised her eyebrows, she plowed on. “Look, I may seem like a real hick to you, but I can see things...and the way you and Sandy were dancing—“

“I think of Sandy as a kid brother,” Ceile said calmly. though recalling two previous warnings about her feelings, which were more on display than she realized.

“You weren’t looking at him like he was a kid brother.”

“All right, all right—I first met him in early 1944—a day or a few days after I met Joe, as a matter of fact. He was smart, knew his job, and one hundred per cent devoted to Joe. And despite falling in love with Joe, I could see Sandy’s broad shoulders and his blue eyes...and yes, he is still broad shouldered and his eyes bluer than ever, and he is so much more--Margaret, who doesn’t have some stray flames in their heart?—Sandy loves you, he married you, and it’s that simple.” Margaret was silent and Ceile spilled words into the silence. “When I say it was wartime, I mean it. We were all living on that well known wing and a prayer because the next day might buy you the farm. Don’t have any qualms about me...right?”

Margaret heard Ceile giving her an order.

Ceile saw Margaret’s eyebrows arch. She then blurted, “So, how about you staying away from Joe?”

“Me?” Margaret actually laughed. “What would your husband see in me?”

“As well as being young and very lovely—don’t get me wrong, Joe is no wolf... But you have some qualities he would gladly see in me—a nice sense of domesticity. Cooking, sewing, housekeeping—you’re a home girl, and though Joe didn’t marry me for those things, I know he would like...and I would like—to be a better wife in that way. We have a child now.” She paused, and said, “What advice do you have? You’re a teacher, you must know something.”

Margaret forgot her irritation, such as it was, with Ceile, who seemed to defer to her own experiences of teaching. “Well, quickly...keep your expectations reasonable. Every child is an individual and not everyone likes what you’re trying to give them. If you meet them halfway, or they meet you halfway, you might be planting some seeds that will grow...” In their sudden warmth, no matter how prickly, Margaret said, “When I get home...I have to become a teacher to my mother, if she’ll let me.” She then admitted that her mother could not read. “When I realized that, a lot of things about her started making sense.”

“When did you realize this?”

“About three minutes before the ceremony.”

“Does your father know?”

“I don’t think so. I’m sure he doesn’t. I know for years he has wondered about her—and I—God, I’ve been so cruel—”

“I doubt that...you know, Margaret, I think...if your mother hid that from you both for how many years--? She must be a very intelligent person.”

“Why yes,” Margaret said. “That’s a good point.”

Ceile smiled at her with such a “told ya” look that Margaret once more kind of riled, and yes, Ceile got it, but clearly, she found this to be Margaret’s issue, not her own...but she spoke suddenly about something she had been mulling over since she learned the name of the woman her...Sandy was going to marry. “We may be related in a fashion. I have an aunt—by marriage to my uncle—who was a Whitfield. She was born and raised in England.”

Margaret took this at face value. “Whitfield is not that uncommon of a name.”

“No, but...last summer, before Joe and I came to the States, we visited, in Ireland...a manor that Joe’s ancestors lived near and stole from—the name of Whitfield was mixed up in it as well, its name, Windus Magus, means ‘white field’—”

“What I am to say to this?” Margaret said.

“Nothing,” Ceile admitted. “Except it seems a remarkable coincidence.”

Joe shouted, “Time to go! Three more minutes, and we two guys are gonna come up and get you two ladies!”

“Three it is,” Ceile shouted down the stairs. Then she turned back to Margaret for one more thing... “Note.” She pulled her hair back and pointed to the little triangle. “Show me yours. Come on, show me. It’s there.”

Margaret, wonderingly, pulled her hair back.

Awkwardly, Ceile held a mirror up to Margaret’s temple, and then they moved to the mirror of the dressing table.

“When did you get it?” Ceile asked.

“I don’t know—wait, what about yours?”

“I’m not sure,” Ceile said.

Margaret suddenly realized...that mark must have been what Polebiate was looking for when he twisted her hair back...but why, what the hell...

"Joe and Sandy have the same mark. It's on their forearms."

"Do they know?"

"I...don't know. Nor if they know about ours. I think we should keep quiet about these marks too."

"Of course," Margaret murmured.

"You have two more minutes," Joe then shouted up. They both jumped. No more time for talk. About strange things, about what they had heard.

Down below, Tib said to Sandy, "You may need chains to get your car out tomorrow."

Sandy said, "Cripes, I hadn't—we don't have chains—"

"You can find some in the trunk by the garage," Crusard said.

They wrapped up and followed Tib into the breathtaking cold, their breaths smoking in the air. They labored toward the car, and Tib found the chains. Efficient at many things, Tib took Sandy's keys, started the car, then laid the chains out. They watched while easily got them on the tires. He then emerged from the car's interior, looked at Joe and Sandy and said, firmly, "If you see or meet Creighton...no mention of this meeting."

"What?" Joe said, his breath almost slapping into ice.

"I will make the report. But no word about this as another of keeping some very strange affairs quiet. And, as you two may have guessed...this meeting was a kind of test for those two men."

**

Conversation was over; and what had been said in five minutes would uphold them, scare them, unnerve them, amuse them for quite some time. But not make them into bosom friends. They left the room, bags in hands, and descended the stairs, calmly.

Vilda and Dryatkin waited. Tib stood by, as if waiting orders. Crusard was glancing about wistfully...and Tib had efficiently taken the luggage to the boat. Joe and Sandy were engaged in conversation but about the helicopter that carried them from the Los Angeles basin up into the mountains. Joe was impressed, with the machine, and with the pilot. "That guy aced anything I saw from those hotshots at the 511th...flying something that looks like an upside down goose

but he cut through that storm and got us here. Jets are something, but helicopters can do things they can't."

Before they parted in the great main room, Ceile whispered something to Margaret. There were hugs, sincere ones if also nervous. "Sorry about this," Joe muttered in Sandy's ear. "In the meantime, God keep you both." Despite everything, Sandy heard Joe's evoking of God...he always understood Joe didn't believe in God, at least the conventional one in the Bible, and in churches. "God keep you and Ceile," Margaret said. Ceile towered over her and then hugged her, though gingerly. "Take care of him," she whispered. Margaret knew this meant more than cooking and cleaning and mending his socks, as if anybody mended socks these days...

The honeymooners watched as their unwanted guests, either loved or feared—puzzled over--bustle off like passengers at an airport. They watched from the picture window as the five people climbed into the boat, and were taken across the lake.

Leaving them alone and alive.

Sandy stared at them all, disappearing into the shadows of the other side of the lake. He had not had the chance to tell Joe about finding the flask at the site in Poland. He should have. Maybe not.

Sandy and Margaret finally moved to the fire, speechless. They stood there, arms around each other. "What would you like to do ho-ney?" Margaret whispered.

"Even though it's just about noon...let's go upstairs."

Margaret, reveling in the absolute silence of the cabin, determinedly pushing aside all the crazy things that happened—more than Sandy knew about...took him by the hand. She drew a warm bath and she and her husband reveled in it. After drying off he left for the bed...she lingered a bit, powdering and then dressing in her lacy nightgown. She came into their room, lighted only by the flames in the small fireplace. "Sandy," she said to her husband, lying in the bed...

"Sandy?—Sandy!"

"Hm, hm?" He came out of sleep. "Daisy, you look beautiful..."

"Thank you...sweet dreams, ho-ney." She pulled the blanket up over his naked body. Well. Well. Well... At nine that evening, the golden chimes murmured down into the main room where she sat up when she heard "Daisy? Daisy?"

Sandy, clad only in a robe, rushed out on the landing and looked down...to see Margaret relaxing in front of the fire on a pile of pillows and wrapped in a satin comforter she had taken from some bedroom. He hurried down.

She awoke, or pretended to. She frowned at him...or pretended to. He went down on his knees, begging for forgiveness...or pretended to. She pretended to forgive him...he admired her lace nightgown which was soon lying beside them...nothing to forgive she murmured in his ear as they lay intertwined, their hearts and minds and bodies in balance, in rhythm, in love, in sleeping, in stirring against each other.

The dawn, as always...Margaret grinned. "A bit of advice from one of our departed guests...nothing like making love in front of a fire." They proved it again...

"Let's eat," Margaret then whispered. "I'm starving."

"I am too!" Sandy had not eaten in nearly 24 hours. They unrolled themselves from the comforter, got into their robes against the cold, and then peeked into the kitchen to see if anybody lurked about. It was empty. Goosing each other, they located a skillet, and found the ham and eggs they had brought with them; they toasted bread and brewed coffee...and found a bottle of champagne in the refrigerator. After breakfast and two glasses of the stuff, they settled in front of the fire...by now it was past noon. They had to leave the next morning, and they felt it approaching.

"What a magnificent place," Margaret said. "Despite...everything, a no lovelier place for a honeymoon could exist."

"You like it, huh?" Sandy said.

"Adore it."

"Well then...it's yours."

She smiled.

"Really," he said.

"What—WHAT?"

"All right, it's ours."

She seized him by the lapels of his robe. "What are you saying?!"

"It's ours...when Dr. Crusard passes on. He willed it to us as a wedding gift." He hurried upstairs and found the envelope Crusard had given him in their brief chat. Seated in Sandy's lap in front of the fire, she read it. He didn't bother to tell her that Crusard admitted that the government had requisitioned the place, which might be just as well. But if the government de-requisitioned it...

“Thank God. I hope he lives a long time. What would taxes and maintenance be on a place like this?”

“More than we could afford—at least now.” She snuggled into his lap. “I’m sorry for teasing you—and you reacted the same way I did—and I recalled how you once said a bigger and better house doesn’t guarantee happiness.”

“No, indeed.”

“Two houses don’t either.”

For a moment she rested her head on his shoulder and then raised it. “What?”

“Joe and Ceile’s wedding gift—actually from his mother, Irene—remember, you spoke with her on the phone when we were in New York? She’s given us a cabin by Starfire Lake, in Connecticut.”

“Oh my God...”

“Hold on, again. It’s for us to accept when and if we are ready.”

“Thank God again...Connecticut? Does she have cabins to burn?”

“Her trust owns the deeds of eleven lakeside cabins—beautiful places too, not like this, but not log things with the facilities out back. We’re being offered the one intended for Joe’s younger brother, Jeff. He died at Clark Field in December 1941.”

“Wow. These Gallaghers must be something. Even more than I can see...”

“They are...”

She clung to him as reality intruded into their honeymoon, already curtailed. They were both obliged to and in the cross-hairs of an organization that seemed to ready to trust them. Perhaps distrust would return the next day. When he displayed his left forearm earlier, she had seen that mark, the twin of her own, and also twinned with Ceile and Joe.

They finally pulled apart and looked at each other, both sets of eyes blue, fiery and shadowed.

“We have a lot to face. With you I can do it.”

“Keep right where you are,” she said, and ran upstairs and came back with a card. “I was going to give this to you at the airport in case we had to drive there immediately. Let’s read it now.”

Enfolded in his arms, Margaret read the last lines of “Dover Beach” by Matthew Arnold. The final portion of the poem was beautiful, sad...and frightening.

Ah, love, let us be true

*To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

**

Their second married night was spent in the bed, and in some ways was not entirely successful, but they knew their few days were over, and they must leave a haven that had been invaded for a future complicated by several levels of uncertainty.

They got up, showered together and after making breakfast they cleaned the kitchen with a sense of proprietorship. They packed, and left, and Sandy felt both grief and relief when he locked the heavy door and dropped the key at an appointed place. He took Margaret's hand and they galumphed to their car, following a path made for them. There were chains on the wheels. Sandy figured Tib had taken care of this for them.

Good or bad?

"Ours, perhaps," she said, looking back at the snow-frosted mansion that looked like something out of fairy tale. "Someday!" She got into the car.

"Yep," Sandy said. "Gonna check the engine," he then said. He noted that the hood seemed undisturbed as snow was still caked on it...but...nothing seemed amiss. Then he circled the car, knowing that Margaret was watching him, and then ducked down to peer underneath... Nothing. Okay. Okay... He climbed in, kissed Margaret—and inserted the key in the ignition and nothing happened.

He got the car down the road to the highway, which had been cleared. They stopped at Ned's Eats and Gas for fuel. They cleaned off the crusted windshield and removed the chains, with help from Ned himself. They commenced the drive down and they both felt their spirits rising as they re-entered the normal world. Sandy, intent on navigating the road which still had icy spots, glanced over to his—wife—and said, "What's the smile for?" He was relieved to see it.

"It's just..." She pulled her hair away from her face and then grinned. "Not every mild-mannered high school teacher of English has a secret life you know."

"Wonder Woman huh? Where are your magic bracelets?"

“No bracelets, but I have a breastplate. And it won’t fail you. Never.”

They took hands and said, together, “O love, let us be true to each other...”

They both silently added, “And brave.”

They descended into the Los Angeles basin, and the world of streets and buildings and lights and people crossing at crosswalks sobered them. Sandy said, “Daisy, let’s talk, huh, before we get home. Hell, we’ve got a lot to say.”

She was ready. “Sandy, are those men telling the truth, about, about...people from outer space being here?”

**

In a hotel room in Deming, New Mexico, Ceile and Joe had a jolt of brandy. For a number of reasons, including having a safe trip back to Los Angeles. Both later confessed to the other that they had wondered if they were going to pitched out of the helicopter and if Tib would help or hinder.

They had flown their wedding gift Altair, now a sturdy five years old, which Ceile had flown to San Antonio months earlier. They had piloted it from Texas to California, and now back, and it had been a little hair raising as storms buffeted their small craft. They would complete their hop to San Antonio the next day, starting early. Warmed up and relaxing, Ceile asked her husband the exact same question, and he said, “Well, what do you think?”

“Well, what do you think?” she returned.

**

Negotiating the sprawl of Los Angeles, Sandy took care with his answer. “According to our friends they’ve been here a long time...maybe they’re not from outer space anymore, they’re, uh...earth people. I mean, my family was in Poland, but I consider myself American.” He looked at her as they waited at an intersection. “Not a good comparison?”

**

“So we’re Americans for several generations, but I still consider myself Irish,” Ceile said. “All right, maybe not a good comparison.”

“Yep, Ireland gets marched down Fifth Avenue every St. Patrick’s Day, and it’s only a hop across the pond. These people are stuck here...their descendants have no idea what their home was like. And can’t go home for a visit, as we did in Ireland, that time.”

**

“So you really believe in that story?”

“Well,” Sandy said, “when you think about it...in the whole vast universe surely there’s got to be other planets with life...and if we had the means, I mean we, the whole bunch of us here on the earth, I bet we’d be sailing out trying to find other planets with life on them. They did about eight thousand years ago. And got stuck here. It could happen, I think.”

**

“Those two...” Ceile turned on the lamp between their hotel twin beds, quickly slipping into her own.

Joe fetched the sheets and the blankets up and over him, scented with her body, her soap, her hair. “We two,” he said. “That’s what matters. Leave those two...for the moment.”

“Joe, are those two guys...human?”

“Yes. They’re human. Maybe half dead in some ways, but they are human.”

Joe felt like picking up the phone and running down Creighton to demand what the hell was he thinking sending out those two characters...why didn’t he trust him, or them all? But that was now Creighton got into his position and did a damned good job. Not fully trusting anybody. And he trusted Tib to give Creighton a polite earful of recent events.

**

“They look like they’ve been to hell and back, more than once,” Sandy said. “And then to the mill, whatever that is...No, they don’t look human, but neither did those poor creatures that came out of the camps.”

They drove down streets vivid with neon, golden with street lights, thick with trees, buildings and surging life. “Could this all disappear if you, we, don’t help?”

“I don’t know,” Sandy said. They left Pasadena for Margaret’s home in Altadena, where they had to appear calm, collected and delighted with each other, not fearing the future of the planet. Sandy said so, and they both broke into some laughter. What a honeymoon...

**

“Yes, they are,” Joe said to Ceile. “I know they’re sick—body and mind and maybe in the heart. But they believe in what they are doing, which sounds pretty much like protecting our future...I guess. Not just ours. Maybe the planet’s. Sounds pretty incredible. But that world war we just

survived was about the same. Unbelievable.” The phone rang, and he spoke with the operator. “Yes, thank you... Mom, hi! We’re in Deming, New Mexico. Yes...uh, no. Well, Ted’s okay is he? Well, sounds like he finally cracked the books...Well, we went into the mountains for a few days and stayed at a lodge, after the wedding...how’s Frankie? Okay?...” Ceile asked for the phone and asked if they could speak with him, but he was sleeping...kiss him for us...

As she cradled the phone, he wondered if the “incident” at the Langham was making the rounds by now. Well, agreements were agreements... He was glad that Harvey was not involved in this.

And, he, Joe, never had a chance to tell Sandy about them “meeting in London.” But he finally had some kind of path to Pres. Yes, Irene had told him about Sandy returning the flask, and Pres taking possession of it, only days before he took off on some...mission.

And a path to the henge. It was alien technology, brought here millennias ago...re-created by the Nazis, unsuccessfully.

If that story were true. Was that whole business for real? Yes, it was real. At least, them being in the Sierras and listening to that astounding story was real. And why couldn’t that story be for real?

They turned off the lights and Joe lay in the dark, idly watching the headlights of passing cars streaking light on the curtains. The henge was dangerous here on earth. The henge was helpful to those stranded here on the earth. The henge and its technology had to be kept out of the hands who would exploit it as a weapon, and that included anybody, from the halls of Washington DC to the towers of the Kremlin...China...Korea...the Middle East...

**

“Well, hello you two, I was beginning to get worried.” Elona’s face was taut but happy when she came to the cottage. They had called her from the first working phone they could find on their way home, and assured her they were alive; yes, the storm had been a bad one but they were safely under cover when it hit...

When she finally saw and heard their car pull in, and made herself wait...but finally scurried down the path and knocked at their door, trying to be calm... “Hi, Mama!” Margaret said, caught in the act...of pouring two glasses of wine. “Mrs. Whitfield,” Sandy said, putting his arm around his wife’s shoulders. They looked tired, eager to be alone...but safe and secure in each other’s love.

“Thank you,” Elona then said. “For bringing my daughter home, safely. Well, all’s well.”

“You’re welcome,” Sandy said, not bothering to redefine themselves as husband and wife. No point. There were so many things they could not talk about, including the trite phrase “All’s well.”

Joe and Ceile: Alarms of Struggle and Flight

In San Antonio, in Ceile's quarters, Joe finished packing. He hadn't too much to do as he and Ceile had spent only a week together, restlessly. Ceile attended to her work at the school which led to more than a few ten hour days and yes, there were some dropped words and sympathetic looks as Joe's Langham incident made the rounds. And some smirks. And some phone calls, anxiously inquiring, from Irene and from Max... "Well, I had a few desk drawer reprimands myself," Max said breezily. Then Irene, when she had the chance to talk with Joe alone, asked, tautly, were the rumors true about...Ceile and Sandy? "Of course not Mom," he said. The one thing he really regretted in the set-up is that it seemed to confirm Max's suspicions of Sandy and put a few cracks in Irene's heart. Yet made it clear that this had been done for a reason.

It was hard for them both to speak with Frankie, whose eager voice told him of the fun he had been having, how he liked the school, and when was he coming back? Joe invented some answers, hating himself.

Joe was left in a hell of waiting, waiting, waiting...and finally, in a long telephone conversation, received his desk drawer reprimand, some chill words of sympathy...and new orders: recruiting. "You know, Joe, a general with all your fruit salad might really get these kids excited about joining the Air Force, so wear it all..." He told this to Ceile over dinner, over the anticipated margaritas and nopalitos. "Seize the day," Ceile murmured to herself. She was able to smile when Joe's first posting was to Flagstaff, Arizona.

That night, they desperately sought to make a baby.

The next morning he showered and shaved; in the utilitarian kitchen Ceile prepared breakfast. She took pride in how nice the scrambled eggs looked—how well she had been taught by an old friend she had met again at Randolph and declined to have an affair with, by inches...through some inquiries, she learned he was now stationed in Japan at the Air Force Hospital at Osaka and marrying a Navy nurse with a prosthetic leg.

She plated the eggs and toast, poured coffee and came into the room to say "Joe, it's ready." She wanted him to remember her as being calm, a good cook, in a clean kitchen...this would help him while he was gone with Frankie coming to live with her. She knew people had called her "lightning in a bottle," "mercurial"—and rude and brash and yes, those words all held some truth in them. She chalked it up to her unconventional upbringing. But Joe had to leave knowing Frankie needed a good steady mother—and father, dammit.

Her acceptance of what Joe said he had to do...receded. Joe immediately went to her and they clung to each other, hard. "A few years back I would have sent you like a fellow soldier but we have a child now..." she began.

"Yeah."

"And he places so much trust in us."

"Yeah," Joe said.

"Okay, Danzo, what's bothering you...beyond the obvious, of course." She tried to make her voice upbeat.

Joe began tying his tie. "I bargained with Creighton over Pres." The Windsor knot of his blue tie went up against his throat.

"What was this bargain?"

"I can't say exactly. But a bargain was struck."

Ceile spoke words she had long harbored. "Joe, maybe Pres wanted to disappear."

"No. He was on a mission. And he's alive. Somewhere, he's alive."

"Are you sure?"

"YES!...and I owe him. A helluva lot."

Ceile didn't back down. "What do you owe him Joe? Really, what do you owe them that costs you so much?"

"For one, taking him for granted."

"When did you do that?"

"When we were kids. Didn't want to be bothered with him if it didn't suit my plans. Showing him up on the football field in high school. Didn't know he adored a girl I was dating, and didn't care that much about. Then I come flying into Magadar, knowing I could get fuel for my planes and when I cocked my eagles up his ass I couldn't figure what was wrong—God in heaven, the man was half dead with grief and exhaustion and here came little brother, whooping down from the skies and demanding the fuel he needed to get his men out—"

"Quit being so hard on yourself. That was the war. And it turned out fine."

"He then got into somebody's sites. By me, maybe by Dad too—McGraw perhaps-- got sent to that stinking camp in Stettin. You could do that to a ground pounder, not a flyboy. Damned near ruined his career and he had to take flak for it and then when we told him you weren't pregnant—"

“Dammit, Danzo, that was Preux’s lie to protect me and him—I know it was bad for Pres—and the Albanian business—” She suddenly broke into tears. Joe didn’t comfort her; they had to comfort each other because he too cried. The tears didn’t last long; they couldn’t take the time. They dried each other’s faces. Ceile finally said, “Joe, we’ve paid a certain price too. Lies, crap, more crap... and you just publicly shamed yourself and trotting off like a dog to talk to kids about joining the Air Force.... And now we have a child and you’re going...and...”

“My queen,” Joe said. He never used his endearment for her lightly. “Pres needs me, even if he’s dead. Even if...yes, for Jeff.”

“Oh, dear—heaven or hell—what about Jeff?”

Joe sat down and rubbed the back of his neck with his hand and looked up at his wife. He took her cold hands and squeezed them hard in his own. “Jeff didn’t want to go to West Point. I was on his back about it. Pres told me ‘lay off, if he doesn’t want to go he doesn’t have to.’ But I kept after him, giving him slop about all the Gallagher brothers at the Point and then against the world and he agreed. Maybe he would have lived if he hadn’t—because Joe goddam Gallagher wanted his way—”

“You were much younger at the time. You meant well.”

“Past errors can haunt you forever.”

“That doesn’t sound like you—”

“It sounds exactly like me. And it’s time for me to start paying back.”

She then slapped him. Hard.

He took it as though deserved. “I wasn’t being malicious, but damned selfish. And now I’m being selfish again, leaving you and Frankie alone...all right, Ceile, here it is. During this period of punishment, I’m gonna search for Pres as I can. No word to the folks. This cloud I’m under gives me opportunity. And Max and Irene said...they would support me in anything.”

She sat down on the bed, glad that Frankie was still with his grandmother, and not viewing or hearing this meteor crashing into their marriage which had been struck before by similar meteors.

Joe said, carefully, “My sweet, dear wife...if you could have searched for your brother when he was missing...would you?”

“You’re going for the gut,” Ceile warned. “But yes. I would have.”

“So I have do the same for my brother.”

“But there wasn’t a child involved; there’s a boy who adores you—“

Joe’s face was as hard as a diamond. “Pres is still more important--I’ve known him longer. Disappointed him more. He has to come first. This may be my only chance to search for him.”

“Let’s have it all. Does this jaunt have to do with...what we learned up in the Sierras?”

“Yes.”

**

A half hour later, barely withstanding the kind of tears Joe didn’t think Ceile had within her...and which he joined her in...he waited for his car and his driver in the cold Texas morning. Footsteps came from behind him. He turned, and husband and wife kissed. Ceile’s drying eyes were full of love and fear and. Joe sensed, threat. “Joe, I can’t raise Frankie alone...” she said. This was neither a whining plea, nor the placing of a crown of guilt. She spoke the truth, at least as she knew it.

“You have a loving heart,” Joe said.

“That may not be enough.”

“My parents will help. My queen, I’m turning away from them, too.”

“Are we ever going to...worry about braces for the kids, how high the grass is getting...?”

“If God wills it. My dearest...God keep you.”

“Good wishes with Pres.” They kissed and she turned to reenter the house, warmed but surprised by his evoking of God, whom he had never professed belief in.

He continued to wait in the cold, keeping his back to the golden light showing behind the utilitarian window, and all else he might be leaving behind. Permanently if he died. If he lived, could he come back?

A sedan pulled up; the driver hustled out and waited for him, and when they were both safely inside, the driver carefully turned around.

Tib. Joe had been through too much to panic, much less be fearful, but he could not keep the surprise off his face. “Well, you get around.”

“Indeed, sir,” Tib said.

They drove through the still quiet base, but lights gleamed in many windows, there was the smell of cooking from the dining halls, and they heard the high whining of planes, far away... They passed the gates.

"How's Creighton these days?"

"He seems to be fine sir. I'm at his disposal...and at yours."

"And Villda and Dryatkin..?"

"Sir," Tib said lightly, carefully, sternly, "I have no idea whom you speak of."

Joe knew when to stop asking questions.

At the airport, Tib parked the car, helped Joe with his luggage and then followed him in. "I need to make a phone call," he said, leaving Joe at the ticket counter, at the end of the line. Within a few minutes, Tib came up to him. "You need to change your ticket...and take me with you. Orders from Creighton General."

Joe tried hard not to feel flummoxed.

It was easy to detect. And Tib said, "General, you have to trust me."

"Five letters...enormous dimensions," Joe said. But he knew the power of trust. The fear of having to trust...to trust.

Soon, they both had tickets on the next plane to Los Angeles. Their destination: Altadena. Who else but the Komanskys, Joe thought, though Sandy should have reported to Pensacola by now, maybe he hadn't...Joe was rigid all the way to Los Angeles, an endless six hours.

**

After Joe had departed, Ceile firmly got dressed and firmly went to her office, firmly thinking about issues at hand. Two weeks earlier, her admin had been transferred, and she awaiting a new one; she was getting a bit desperate as the paperwork, though under control, was mounting up... A knock on her door, produced a "Come," and in walked...Julia Lovelace. First lieutenant Julia Lovelace Markos.

She saluted. "Mam."

"You...?" Ceile said, despite everything. She returned the salute.

"Yes, mam. I am your new admin. I am ready to start at any time, Mam."

“Of course, Lieutenant. Thank you. Get yourself familiarized with the desk. I have an agenda for today’s work.”

“Yes Mam.” She did a slightly snotty about face and stalked out. Ceile sat down, more weakly than she was proud of. God. For the first time, she was happy that Joe was...gone.

Sandy and Margaret: On a darkling plain

On their last day together... simultaneously sweet and short, anxious and endless. They walked Felicity; had lunch with Arnold and Elona, retired again, got up and walked by themselves, and one last time in their cottage heated a can of soup and toasted bread in the oven and opened a bottle of wine and pretended there was a fireplace.

Monday morning, early—four am--was the day and hour of Sandy's departure from his temporary home in Altadena. With their faces a blank, binding up both their sadness and joy (from making love for the final time for quite a while), came to the house for a quick breakfast that Elona gladly fixed...maybe too gladly as she declined going to the airport with Arnold, her daughter, and her husband.

"Well, take care of yourself," was Elona's banal farewell as Sandy stood by her daughter in the living room. But she had never seen her daughter so beautiful, and her son-in-law, she grudging, was handsome with love for his wife. She was suddenly embarrassed when her son-in-law kneeled to her and actually, in a gesture that also embarrassed him, took her hand. "You know, I am truly sorry to leave like this...but I am happy that Margaret is with those who love her." His voice, which started out energetically, dwindled and he blushed.

"Well, I am happy too...No worries about us or for Margaret...have a good, uh, training," she said.

"Thank you." They left. Felicity, which had received a hug and a kiss from Sandy, sat down beside Elona and watched them leave.

They were silent during the ride from Altadena, Pasadena and then to Burbank. The airport seemed indecently bright as they walked in and Sandy had his ticket checked and stamped for San Antonio, where he would catch a connecting flight. They waited, small talking, and as the moment of departure grew near, Arnold excused himself for the men's room. When he returned, they were enveloped in an embrace...not kissing, just hanging onto each other...and then he had to part. For Sandy, this was another departure, but this time friends weren't leaving, he was, and the friends were now his family, his wife...he regarded Margaret with some astonishment. He was married to this incredible woman, this beautiful woman...this little wonder woman. Who was holding onto mighty secrets.

"Go, go," Margaret said as the passengers started trooping forward.

"I will, I will," Sandy whispered, kissed her again, and then headed out, not looking back. The doors closed. "Want to watch his plane leave?" Arnold asked after a moment.

“No. I have classes to teach in about two hours. Let’s go.” They did. But not after a violent twisting of her face.

Halfway home and assuming his daughter’s silence arose from her man leaving, Arnold suddenly asked, “How you doing, sweetie?”

“Dad, do you think I can make Sandy happy?”

“He was happy enough to propose to you. And you were happy enough to go through with the marriage.”

“But can I make him happy?”

“You can try. But for a man or a woman to be truly happy, they have to be happy with themselves. But...he didn’t have an easy growing up we know and that can make for problems...he strikes me as struggling with fear at times.”

“How can I help him with his fears?”

“Just love the heck out of him. But make sure he loves the heck out of you too. He’ll be okay. And I am proud to call him my son-in-law. I love the guy honey.”

“So will Mama, someday.”

“I hope so...but...there are things I sure can’t understand about your mother.”

“You said it just a moment ago. Not being happy with herself—rather than with you or with me...” She paused. “Mama can’t read.”

“Who told you that?”

“I figured it out on my own.”

“Well, good God...my God, you’re right.” Arnold drove on but in growing amazement. “You’re right...It explains so much.”

“Including not even going to the airport. It was another chance to expose herself... are you ashamed of her?” Margaret put the hard question delicately.

“Well, yes---no, I mean—why didn’t she ever tell me?”

“She was embarrassed...ashamed.”

“Well...I feel like I’ve been married thirty years to a woman who has a man underneath the bed.”

“Don’t say anything. I’m going to...say something and try to teach her to read, if she will let me.”

“Knowing your mother, she’ll deny it...but God, sweetie, try. Maybe she’ll... treat me right again, and I’ll treat her right...she knows my disappointment in her—though she’s been a good wife and a good mother, in her own way.”

“And darned intelligent,” Margaret said. “If she’s hidden it this long...Dad, I suppose that is why you are on duty so much?”

“Well, it made things easier for us both,” he admitted.

It was good, she thought, to worry about ordinary things. Life had to return to normal despite that time in the mountains—but—when Arnold pulled into and drove down the twin strips of concrete to the carport, they saw the kitchen door open...and Boblice easing out. Inside, Felicity barked furiously.

“What is this?” said Arnold, in the voice of an experienced police officer.

“I was just driving by.”

“At seven in the morning?” demanded Margaret. The man glanced at her, carelessly, carefully.

“What is this about?” Arnold repeated. He took off his jacket, reminding the man he was a police officer.

“I came here to apologize for my wife,” he said.

Elona stood behind the kitchen’s screen door. Felicity’s bark sounded somewhere in the house.

“Well,” Elona said, “thank you. Give my uh, best, to Duvina. Right, Margaret?”

“Sure,” Margaret said, and looked at her mother before she could bark a remonstrance.

“Madam,” said Boblice, “I will relay such.” He walked to his car parked down the street, and drove off. Elona turned to cooking their breakfast. Margaret went upstairs to finish dressing for her work day, and she did not think of Sandy for a moment...after she saw her bedroom was disturbed. This was after she had released the frantic Felicity, who had damaged the sewing room door with her scratching. She carried her downstairs to her water bowl where she eagerly lapped. In the middle of making toast, Elona said “Felicity made such a fuss when he came in, I had to put her away.”

“You let him in?” Margaret demanded.

“No. Uh, I found him in the house—I left to see Mrs. Moreland across the street—she’s been sick and I made her a cup of tea--and when I returned, he was here and holding Felicity off.”

“What did he want? I don’t believe that about making an apology—”

“He said he would like to purchase a copy of the film of the wedding that fellow made—the one with the funny accent—”

“Preux,” Margaret said.

“He didn’t know where to find him and so came to ask us. I couldn’t tell him, I don’t know where that man is.”

They ate breakfast and Arnold and Margaret took off for work, with Margaret dropping her dad off at a sub-station. Before they turned the first corner, she asked her dad, “Can you check this guy out?”

“For what?” Arnold asked, honestly. “Your mother’s story doesn’t exactly convict him of anything except calling too early.”

“I think he was in my room.”

“Anything missing?”

“No.” Should she tell him about his near assault on her?—no time, her first class was in fifteen minutes.

It was Margaret’s first day back from being married and having a honeymoon—a honeymoon she merely described, to polite questions, as “Lovely, thank you,” and made no point of her students now calling her “Mrs. Komansky,” rather than “Miss Whitfield.” She would do so in the fall, in the new school year—if she were here in the fall...

Back home, she could not find anything missing from her room...and then she could no longer bear her girl’s bedroom, hardly changed from the age of seventeen when her mother made her new curtains and she wove a new pink and white bedspread and her father found a second hand dressing table that she cleaned up and painted white. At dinner, she announced she would return to the cottage.

“Why?” demanded her mother.

“I’m married now. My husband is away.”

“That’s no reason.”

“No, it’s not. But...well, I don’t want to go back to being the girl in the house. I’m married. It’s time for me to be on my own two feet—even it’s only about 20 yards away,” she then joked. “There are some groceries, and I have a few of my things there already.”

“That still doesn’t make any sense,” her mother repeated. Her father continued to eat, not interfering, letting his two girls work it out, but silently cheering his daughter on. Margaret had always been so timid.

“Well, Dostoevsky wrote...”

“You read too many books,” Elona huffed.

“If you read more books you would understand,” her daughter said, and then said, with her father’s taut approval, “and it is time you learned...Mama.”

Elona’s knife clattered to her plate. She stared at her daughter and her husband. She maneuvered her fork over her squash, and then she rose, crying. Not affected weeping, but tears, real tears that it took her husband to stop, and soothe away. “Elly, it won’t be hard. Just let your daughter teach you.”

“I’m so sorry,” she gasped.

“I am too...meaning, you once said you didn’t get all the schooling you wanted. Well, now you can have it. And if Margaret wants to live in the cottage, she can. She’s married now and needs to be her own woman now, not our daughter only.”

Elona dropped her head, waggled it, and struggled with her horrid disappointment in herself and her shame of her secret being found out.

They finished their meal and collected their plates...and then Elona heard Margaret packing a bag.

Elona did the dishes, and in time awakened Arnold from his nap as he was taking over for a sick officer at midnight. “Elly, sweetie, it’s gonna be fine,” he said, knotting his tie and giving his shoes another swipe with the polishing cloth. “She’s twenty yards away...and someday, she’s going be a lot farther away—Sandy, when he finishes training, may be sent to Hawaii and she can go with him.” Margaret showed up then... to kiss her mother goodnight, and say goodbye to her dad....and pick her toothbrush and toothpaste. “Can I come for dinner tomorrow night?” she asked her mother. “I’m going to bring a special book.”

“Any time. Any time.”

Within a week, things sorted themselves out... almost. Elona gave up on Margaret moving back and Margaret pioneered with living alone...not too alone. It was good to see the windows of her house by glancing through the bedroom window, and it was also good to remember how Sandy told her of the possible vicissitudes of being a Navy pilot's wife. Housing, for one thing. If they manage to get a housing, it still might not be very nice and would be smudged with footprints of many others; sagging mattresses and left over salt and pepper. But, no big deal.

A much larger deal: teaching her mother to read. Margaret did not simply sit down with the alphabet book one night; rather, she had consulted with one of her professors at UCLA, about educating an adult. She also was aware that her mother may have certain learning difficulties which were beginning to be detected as a true condition, not just...obtuseness. With special attention, she could learn. Their first session seemed to go well, as Elona conquered the alphabet, at least a part of it, and sought to sound out a word: "tin." Then "win," "bin," "sin," and—and then went on her own to "sun," "bun," and "gun." She told her daughter, "Why, this isn't so hard, after all." "We have a ways to go," her daughter assured her. "But Mama, you're reading!"

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Three nights later Elona came out of her sleep to hear footsteps along the corridor and their lightness told them they belonged to Margaret. Her door opened and closed...thank God, Elona thought, she had finally come to her senses and moved out of that shack. Perhaps it would mean that she would stay home as well, and not join her husband in Pensacola...She then recalled Arnold's firm words to her... "Elly, time to let go. She's got a good man."

Well, maybe he was "good"—but his name, his occasional cobra-like looks, his background...a boys' home did not make him the kind of man she wanted and still wanted her only daughter to have. Stopping his education to fly off in the Navy, what was he thinking?—

Something heavy fell in Margaret's bedroom. Elona tried to ignore it but she and Margaret were peeved at each other when Elona grew impatient with learning the alphabet; some letters could not sink in... Something else grated on the floor. Elona got out of bed and went to Margaret's room...the opened door revealed a moving body; she turned on the overhead light.

"Hello...Madam Whitfield," said Boblice.

When she immediately turned, he was by her side, his hand clamped about her wrist. "Where is your charming daughter? We had a meeting planned."

"Meeting?" Elona demanded before he placed his hand over her mouth and dragged her to the bed and pressed down on her.

“Where is she? I’ll kill you if you don’t tell me—” When she was silent, his hand slammed on her face once, twice, and in spite of everything she got out “Margaret! Margaret--!!”

Felicity barked, and barked—and dashed away, barking, barking...

“WHERE IS SHE?”

Like a snake he slid off her and started toward the door and Elona launched herself at him, just managing to grab his waist as he reached the corridor. He fell and she scrambled on top of him. They wordlessly, violently, fought, rolling around on the carpet, but he was striking her, hard and then gripped her throat...Suddenly, the earth shattered.

She lay there, tasting something foul in her mouth and moved in and out of darkness. She had to get up—Margaret—she would learn to read, she would...She somehow crawled to her feet, using the door frame, and tottered down the hallway to the backstairs...every step was an effort...she got to the bottom of the steps, sat down and put her head between her legs...

“Mama...” Margaret sat beside her on the steps. She smelled something. Smoke. The phone rang. Margaret staggered down to answer it. “Yes, the noise—We heard it too—backfire, I think—a car in the alley behind us... Yes, it was loud.”

Felicity joined them. Elona took her in her lap and crooned to her. “We have to wait for Dad,” Margaret said. “He should be home in two hours...”

Arnold came in to find his wife and daughter, both awake, both composed, both rigid with fear. He knew the smell of gunfire. “Dad,” Margaret began... She had been roused by Felicity’s barking: sharp, incisive, angry. She flew across the lawn to the kitchen, dashed upstairs and seized the loaded gun that Arnold kept in the nightstand on his side of the bed....and she fired into the back of his head.

“Whose head?”

Margaret became sick. Elona answered, “Duvina’s husband.”

Arnold sat down and stared at his two women. “Why?”

“He came here to kill me,” Margaret said.

**

Moved by an understandable desire to protect his wife and daughter, Arnold told Margaret that before calling the police...they needed to talk with Duvina. Knowing he was putting his entire spotless career on the line, he firmly told his wife to stay home, keep the lights off, while he and Margaret were gone.

Duvina's small stucco house was in Pasadena, in a district that teetered between working class and middle class. It seemed completely dark when Arnold pulled up to the curb. "Stay behind me honey," he whispered to his daughter. Nobody answered his quiet knocking on the front door. They found the kitchen door open and went in. Arnold told his daughter, don't touch a thing...

A light was flickering in a room off the living room. They saw Gordon seated in front of the tv set, which only showed a test pattern. Margaret started toward him and her foot came up against Duvina's body.

In the shine of Arnold's flashlight, her mouth and eyes were open and bruises were rising on her neck. It had been a violent death for the young woman.

As Margaret waited with Gordon, who merely looked at her when she came up to him... Arnold moved quietly through the rest of the house and found nothing. He came back to his daughter and Gordon. "What happened?"

Gordon said he woke up to noise and found the man his mother married strangling her, right on the couch. "When?" He didn't know. "He didn't hurt you?" "I hid. I ran outside. He then left. It was cold. I came back in."

When Arnold was silent, the boy asked, like an eight year old, "You gonna call the cops?" He shrugged when Arnold told him he was "The cops. And Gordon, you'll do what I tell you to do. We're going to take you to our home."

The kid nodded. "You got television?" he asked. "The Lone Ranger's on tomorrow."

Arnold parked his car a block away from their house and they walked up the side alley to go in the backway. Margaret and Elona got Gordon to bed despite his demanding to watch their television though nothing was on. He conked out. Arnold sat at the kitchen table with his two girls, not knowing what to do. His job was in jeopardy. His reputation sat on a tightrope. Worse, worse—his family was in jeopardy. His brain circled, and circled—and circled...trying to land. "Dad, what do we do?" Margaret asked him.

Arnold stood up, fishing the car keys out of his pocket. "I've got to go back to Duvina. In the meantime...don't do anything."

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He drove back to Duvina's. Arnold then saw a car parked in front of the house and when he cruised by, his sharp eyes saw the photographer, the PRO man, the man...Preux. In the driver seat.

He circled, stopped a block away and parked. He walked silently up and tapped on the rear window. Preux, unwisely, flung himself out, right into Arnold, but he was experienced enough not to bolt... “Well?” said Arnold.

“I say the same t’you, suh,” said Preux, politely, pointedly.

“Let’s get in and sit a spell. And don’t touch a thing.”

They went inside and did not turn on the lights. Preux spoke first, without a hint of accent.

“Where is everybody?”

Arnold used his flashlight to reveal Duvina’s body. “From what we understand—from the boy—her husband did this. Now, why are you here?”

“Boblice--whatever—came to my hotel room and asked to buy the film this afternoon. I said no. Later, he broke in and tore it apart, probably trying to find some film I was smart enough to hide in the hotel safe. I found out where he lived, and came here.”

“Why didn’t you didn’t call the cops?”

“No evidence that he was the thief, and he didn’t steal the film anyway.”

“Bunk.”

“I had reasons to do it this way,” Preux said. This was not hedging. “Where is that kid, that Gordon?”

“My house.”

“You haven’t reported this, I take it.”

“Not yet.”

Preux followed Arnold’s car and then parked well away from the Whitfield residence. He went in, said hello to three white faces. He said, “Let me make a phone call.” He did.

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They talked about what had happened. Margaret had killed Boblice. She said so, directly. He had been attacking her mother. A week earlier, she and her dad had found him leaving the house, after demanding information about the wedding being filmed, without his knowledge. Elona, startled, had told him the man’s name was Preux, he was staying at a hotel on Colorado in Pasadena. He found him. Asked about the film. Could not get a copy, but he could see it soon, on the screen, Preux, no fool, had locked it in the hotel safe.

Preux later found his room vandalized. "I figured he didn't want to be caught on camera—but why did he attack Mrs. Whitfield?"

Margaret then spoke. Boblice didn't know she was staying in the cottage and thought Elona was her.

"But why did he attack your mother—by extension you?"

Margaret took a great big breath and reported...Boblice had attacked her in the cottage shortly after the wedding reception. "He only pulled on my hair, Gordon stopped him—"

"Seems he wasn't trying only to pull your hair if he thought your mother was you. Why should he want to kill you?"

She whispered that she didn't know. She did not add, "Yet." She had to think. She had to teach her classes. Somehow, she dressed, combed her hair, applied her make up, gathered her things, and left, under escort of Preux and her father. She saw her father was looking to Preux—whose sense of savviness was...helping him.

She somehow got through the day. A moment's normalcy was struck down by the fact she had killed a man and her father was concealing her cousin's murder. Preux picked her up and drove her home and the questioning began again as they tastelessly ate the dinner Elona fixed for them.

They simultaneously jumped at a knock at the door. Clearly, somebody had come to call for an account of the last several hours. "I'll answer it," Margaret murmured.

It took her a moment to recognize General Gallagher. She later thought of him as Perseus, the hero who rescued Andromeda from her rock, on which she was chained naked to await a sea beast to consume her... Behind him was the man she met at the cabin, "Tib." They told her they were on orders from Tib's immediate superior, General David Creighton.

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The two men assumed charge of the developing situation, with a breathtaking series of decisions that didn't lift the blanket of fear and dread but helped with bringing the situation into some focus.

Margaret once more related how the situation developed—with a quiet warning from Tib, who was backed up by Gallagher: don't speak of recent events in the Sierras...which was for her parents' sake. Don't bring up the names Villda and Dryatkin.

Within two hours, Duvina's body was quietly removed to a government morgue. Boblice's body was removed to the cottage and wrapped in dry ice.

Margaret then told of relationship with Boblice—he was a man who seemed to come out of nowhere, and she first met him at the funeral of Duvina's mother. He seemed to be pursuing her, though he married her cousin Duvina. He tried to keep his wife calm when Margaret refused to let her be Matron of Honor. Then, after the ceremony, he attacked her in the cottage behind the main house. Maybe he was trying to rape her, maybe kill her. The boy Gordy stopped him, by arriving.

Arnold, present during this interview, shook his head. "You didn't say a word?"

Joe said, "You brought that memory to your honeymoon?"

"We had so little time." She pressed her hands to her face, and then removed them. "If I said something...this wouldn't have happened."

Tib said, "Perhaps." They advised the Whitfield family to continue however normally they could.

In the morning, Margaret had to teach...and Arnold had to get to his duty shift. They did. With joy and with fear. Later, both confessed they didn't know how they did it but the normalcy of the work steadied them but what had happened in their home. At the Whitfield residence, there were more phone calls, quiet leavetaking, equally quiet returns, at all times cautious that the neighbors had no suspicions of the strange events that had transpired in the blue and white bungalow on their residential street, and that a body, wrapped in dry ice, was in the cottage.

Steps were taken with Duvina's disappearance. The landlord who only cared about losing a renter was paid off. Services were cut off, and the mail redirected to Arnold and Elona's address. Joe, Tib and Preux then cleaned the house out. Duvina's closets were overstuffed. Her husband seemed to have no clothing. Cosmetics and pills; liquor; a few kitchen items, all unwashed. Towels and sheets were still in place. Preux finally found a cigar box with some papers—marriage licenses. Curiously, no marriage license for her and Boblice, and no birth certificate for the kid. Everything went into storage boxes and disappeared somewhere.

Neighbors were not at all curious at the moving van. Relatives later went on to shruggingly accept the story she had left on her own with that weird character she had married, and dumped her kid on Arnold and Elona, poor people.

"The kid" was fairly quiet during this. But he knocked over neighbor's trash cans. He taunted Felicity over nothing. He ignored anybody talking to him, whether nicely, or angrily. When somebody finally got around to realizing that nobody knew his last name, he mumbled "McMichael." Asked about his father, he said, carelessly, "I think he died in prison." The story

was confirmed, and they learned that Raoul McMichael had died violently, murdered by another r

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Tib and Joe were both glad and appalled that Gordon regarded his mother dying so violently, and apparently witnessing it, as little to nothing. They joined him watching "The Lone Ranger," that second evening. Stuffing his mouth with two hot dogs while he watched the screen he was utterly absorbed in "the masked man and his Indian companion's" good deeds. Tib and Joe watched as well, amused at the stiff delivery and cliché situations, yet Joe was surprised when the Lone Ranger spoke of respecting all people, and that obeying the law made better right for everybody. After the show was over, with the flourish of the William Tell Overture, they asked Gordon if he could answer a few questions.... Apparently inspired by the masked man's model of courtesy, he nodded, almost happy.

When he was asked about his school, so they could call and explain his absence, he shrugged. He didn't go to school. He was registered at the elementary school closest to his home, but the school had given up trying to contact his mom about him not going. Joe, appalled, asked him if he could read... "Sure." He proved it, and he could, though not well. He could do easy sums, but rather uneasily.

When he was questioned by Tib and by Joe about the man called Boblice his answers were honest but vague.

"Where was he from?"

"From Europe. He's a count there."

"Did he work?"

"No."

"Did he and your mother fight?"

"Sure."

"What about?"

"Margaret. She was always yelling about her."

"Why was she yelling about her?"

"Said that he really wanted to marry her and that Margaret was stupid."

"What did you think of your stepfather?"

“Gave me beer when I asked for it. I like the taste. Gave me money to leave the house.”

“Did you ever think there was ever anything strange about him?”

“Marrying my mother was pretty weird. I can tell he didn’t like her.”

“Do you know why your mother married him?”

“She was stupid.” He spoke these three ugly words so carelessly that Joe was saddened. Gordon then didn’t want to talk anymore. He said he wanted to go to bed and he did.

Joe then talked with his two colleagues. “From Europe--he could have been from anywhere, from Trieste to Trondheim--What was he count of? Counts have more than just the title.” Not surprisingly the house had yielded no documents, passports, even banking statements. By now, some discreet and official calls to Washington had people searching for the man’s immigration status. Nothing was being found.

By evening of the third endless day, Preux had the film developed, and they gathered in the dark living room to watch it. Even Creighton decided not to block the uninformed; hell, they were all involved. Elona, who had distanced herself from a great deal of this, refused to watch. Arnold and Margaret joined.

The film was threaded through the projector Preux brought and with the lights out, the black and white images of the marriage, all of ten days ago, were screened. “I thought you said you filmed him,” Joe remarked. They backed the film up and ran the clips again. The film revealed Duvina, and Gordon. And then there was Boblice—or was it? “He was there,” Preux said. “I know he was there...there! See that shadow?”

They ran the film again at slow motion. Preux’s eyes, sharpened from years of peering at filmed images, had detected a smudge of light, a smudge of darkness, where the man had stood.

“There,” said Margaret. Her eyes saw a face limned by light and by shadow that appeared, disappeared... “He’s not fully registering on camera.” She looked at Preux, hanging over the projector, thumbnail wedged in his lower teeth, staring at the screen. She said, “That’s like Dracula...a vampire.”

“Huh?” Arnold’s overrode the clackety whir of the reel. “What the hell are you talking about—vampires?...come on...” But he watched carefully when the film was shown again, and then again. Taking a break, they switched on a couple of lamps, lighted cigarettes, and glanced at each other.

Tib, a cigarette poking between his lips, served coffee to the three other men and Margaret. She suddenly said, “If you put the chains on our wheels at the cabin, we really appreciated it.”

"I did," he smiled. "I figured you California types needed help with that."

Arnold's hand violently slammed on the arm of his chair and he spewed forth a torrent of profanity...which left him white-faced and shaking. "I've seen and heard a helluva lot, even in Pasadena," he finally said, "But the likes of ...this...what do you guys want, with me—my daughter?" After a moment, he tried to say jokingly, "vampires?" His voice choked a sob of fear back.

Margaret stood up. "I'm going to bed," she said. "I have classes to teach in six hours." She stood and they stood, not with polite respect but true respect. She went to her room, and heard her mother go to bed. Her father stayed below with the three men, talking...talking...and after two hours lying awake she came down the stairs, both flushed and pale. "If I'm going to be arrested for murder," she blurted...and then caught her voice back.

Arnold stood up, walked to the stairs and held his hand out to his daughter. "These men and I have come to what, an agreement? Duvina's is being covered up. So is Boblice. They have strong connections and will see that there is nothing for us to answer for."

Margaret stared at them. "That's not right. But, thank you."

"It's not easy not to worry...but try to. Margaret," then added Joe, "don't tell Sandy about this."

"Thanks," she whispered. She went back upstairs and slept for the first time in three nights.

Downstairs, in a livingroom that Arnold hardly recognized anymore as the relative haven of peace, the three men had to suddenly take their leave. Tib would stay in the vicinity, keeping an eye out for any strange activity. Within the hour, Joe and Preux left, shaking Arnold's cold hand, thanking him, assuring him.

He saw them to the backdoor, the back walk, and to their car. Easing the doors shut, the three men departed...taking a secret with them.

Three hours earlier they were ready to take the body of Boblice away from the cottage where it had rested in its dry ice cocoon for three days.

It hadn't been there. There seemed signs that the body had come to its feet, and walked away. No windows or doors were forced. No sign of scuffle.

They said nothing, just went through the motions of putting a blanket wrapped body into a car.

"How are we going to explain this to Creighton?" Joe asked, knocking back a brandy.

"Leave it to me," said Tib.

**

At five that same morning, after a night in which he celebrated, grew sick with worry, taut with fear, he knocked on Margaret's door. She let him in. "Come away with me. Leave. I have a friend who has a spread up in Alaska. I know the docks at San Pedro and we can get on a ship and leave."

"No."

"Sweetie, you mean the most to me of anything in the world—please, let me take you away."

"I can't Dad. Bigger things are afoot. And, I am married. I am joining my husband this June."

"I'll annul the marriage."

"You can't without my consent. I'm of age."

"You'll never be of age. Sweetie, I hardly know what the hell you're involved with, but I won't have you—putting your neck out for this; you got married without knowing—"

"I knew about 'things' almost a year ago. He told me, and, and he told me, he warned me—I could leave, I should...and I couldn't. You know...for better, for worse."

"That refers to poverty, sickness, not...strange affairs." He didn't know what else to call recent events.

"Dad...it's a chance for me to be, for once, brave—courageous, willing to yes, put my neck out."

She was so gravely composed that Arnold hardly knew her. "For him?"

"For a lot others, too, I think." She put her hand to her temples, knowing she was not to tell them about the mark. She smiled. "For Don, too. Poor old Don Dakins."

"Don?" Arnold whispered harshly. "What the hell about him?—God in shit, was he involved with this too?"

Margaret was startled at her father's blasphemy. "Of course not!—but what I did to him because I was—scared. Scared to have a boyfriend, scared to lose him. So I went away with him. Scared of not being able to tell him I didn't love him. Scared not to...sleep with him to prove that I loved him. Scared not to accept his proposal. Then so damned scared I left him at the altar. I hurt that poor boy because I was scared. Well, people are asking me to brave now and I want to be brave."

"Honey, Don's gone and it was only a mistake, the kind of mistake a 19 year old girl is known to make."

“It’s also for myself...really. I’ve reproached the hell out of myself for what I did to him and if I’m courageous for once, it’s a way of apologizing to him. Oh Dad, I know it’s silly...but human beings are silly. You know that, being a cop for so long.”

“Yeah, they are.”

“There is destiny in all this.”

Arnold opened his mouth, then closed it, and then spoke, tightly. “If you had said that to me about Sandy—you two were destined for each other—I would have laughed and maybe refused to let you two marry. I’ve seen more than a few couples swear ‘they were destined for each other’ or thought they were, until the husband brained his wife to death or the woman planted a slug in her husband’s head.”

Margaret was silent to this. Finally, “Dad, you’ve got to trust me. Trust us.”

**

“And, now what?” Joe asked, as he and Tib headed for the airport, the next day. The night had been spent in decisions, plans, ideas.

“Recruiting duty,” Tib reminded him. “Don’t worry, your work is here is covered and delays arranged.”

Joe nodded. “Tell Creighton thanks for me, and my personal thanks to you Tib. You must enjoy living an unsettled life.”

“Done so for years,” Tib said. “Good wishes General, and take care. Your life isn’t exactly settled either.”

Sandy: A Seeming Good Land of Dreams – Pensacola, January-June

Sandy and his roommate and new friend, fellow directly procured pilot Charles Labourie from Louisiana, entered the officer's mess at Pensacola Mainside, took trays, and selected food. Sandy chose soup and some Jello; he was unexpectedly taut from a three-day gauntlet of processing, and his stomach was in knots. He read the usual sign: "Take all you want, but eat all you take." How much could he take, he wondered, but reminded himself the first week was the first—and the worst. But it was kind of an old story to him. He went through this almost twelve years ago, when he was barely sixteen, and nakedly alone in the world. But he hadn't really enjoyed it then, and was not enjoying it now, particularly since he had a wife at home...

In San Antonio, where he changed planes for Pensacola, he found himself with other DP pilots, who ranged from excited to looking pretty dismal and trying to hide it. They were greeted in Florida with a fair amount of courtesy by a warrant officer, who requested they line up; he called names; they "sang out," and then they were escorted to buses and driven for miles...through air balmy with the tropics. It was in the wee hours before they were finally released into a barracks, and under glaring light, they were shown their bunks and told to get some sleep.

However. Sandy had been first asked by the warrant officer if he would agree to bunking with a Negro.

"If he doesn't mind bunking with a Polack," he answered and then called himself on his flippancy. The warrant officer was clearly relieved and didn't seem to mind.

The business started in the morning. Some of the guys were rapt with wonder of the palm trees and the Spanish styled architecture, revealing they had never made it to the South Pacific or even into other parts of the country. They were lined up, led to the dining hall, and after eating were returned to barracks where they were lectured on their bunks and how to make them up, how to keep their locker and other tasks with neatness and order. They wore their civilian clothes for two days and on the third, passed through a gauntlet of interviews, orders, signing papers. Some of the men, though excited, were complaining of feeling they had lost their identities somewhere, as they adjusted to new clothes, new accommodations, new food, new regimes. As for Sandy, he welcomed it all; he was distracted from that strange meeting in the mountains.

They were released to get some food before their final physicals and getting into their fatigues.

At the mess, Charles, or Chet, took a bowl of macaroni, a slice of ham, a heaping of potatoes and he and Sandy sat down to eat. They were due for the final medical check in fifteen minutes, and that was suddenly cut to three as their names were scratched out over the PA system.

Sandy slurped his soup and gulped the Jello and glanced at Chet who was staring at his barely tasted food. “Eat what you can and hurry,” he said, leaving, and then stopped when Chet glanced around at all the other faces staring at him—faces which turned away the moment they were seen “seeing.” “Man, I’m starving,” Chet said...and recalling the warning sign, took the biggest bite he could of his mashed potatoes, an equally big bite of macaroni and then stuffed his slice of ham into the pants of his civilian trousers, and slipped two slices of buttered bread in his cotton plaid shirt. “Thanks,” he said to Sandy who held the door for him. They flew down the corridor, took an elevator to the third floor and came skidding to a stop at a large room, navally spic and span...with two men, obviously doctors.

In front of each other, they stripped to their shorts; Sandy was not particularly fazed, though Chet, who was new to the military was...and as they stood together for their second round of exams, Sandy’s white skin and Chet’s black skin contrasted with each other. Charles was the second such pilot that the Navy had accepted; the first was Ensign Jesse Brown, already on an aircraft carrier, training in take offs and landings. Long accustomed to having black sailors serve only as messmates on ships, accepting a black pilot was a big step...and a scary one...and Sandy hoped that Chet was up to it. As a Polish Catholic teen with a clunky seven-syllable name, and a chip on his shoulder, he had taken some flak, some of which was kind of deserved, when he went into Army training. But, at least his skin had been white, and Chet’s dark skin was a banner to his perceived place in American society. Sandy later learned that his Army Air Force records had been reviewed, along with the other DP pilots, to determine if they would accept a Negro officer and pilot as a fellow trainee. Possibly his experiences with the Fifteenth Air Force, there on San Sabena island back in 1944 had been noted. He, Joe, and General Ken Chandler pretty much owed their lives pretty much to the Red Tails that day, the jaunty name of the Fifteenth Air Force, and Joe was loud in his thanks.

They passed their physical exams and were told to assume their fatigues, which were handed off to them. “Sir,” said Chet to an officer overseeing their processing, “where are my clothes..?”

“Already being put into boxes to be shipped home,” the officer said to him— tersely, but politely.

Chet turned to Sandy. “My God, my dinner!”

“We get supper in a few more hours--”

“Yeah, but what is my wife gonna think when she finds a piece of ham in my pocket?” Chet demanded. “Hell, you know we can’t contact our families for six weeks once training starts. Oh, God...” Sandy withheld a smile...but Chet saw it anyway. “Look, I know you got experience, so any tips you can help me with I’d appreciate ‘em,” he then said. Since they had stood nearly

naked by each other a few minutes earlier, Chet knew he had to—and could—trust this guy. “Look, they’re all waiting for me to fuck up and you know it.”

At this, Sandy grew quite sober. “I don’t know if they are waiting on it—but I know you face stuff that I didn’t. You may have to help me realize it too.”

“I help you, you help me,” he said.

Sandy suddenly said, “How do we swear?”

“Like this.” They raised their hands and clasped them. Chet said he saw that handshake practiced among certain tribes in Africa; read it in *The National Geographic*.

From that moment on, they were buddies not just cabin mates. Not only were they facing a slam bang program to train them as officers and then as pilots, to help build up the decimated ranks of naval aviators, they were facing racism together, and moreover, they were newly married and missing their wives...a lot. Chet’s wife was pregnant and in April, Chet received word that a baby girl had been born, wife doing well--the sole communication he received from his family. Sandy admired the picture and wondered about when he and Margaret would have their first; maybe they should have tried for a baby before he left. He eagerly waited for the moment he could write his wife—how he loved the sound of that word—and about what he was learning...and how he really took to flying. With all this going on, there were persistent stories that were past the stage of mere rumors, that the Secretary of Defense was trying to amalgamate the services, and reduce the Navy as sea power was second to airpower.

On January 24 they were finally issued uniforms. Sandy felt a little weird about once more getting into his cadet gear, but he remembered exactly how to line up his buckle, align his thumbs on the seams of his pants, and to use a little water with the shoe polish for the best shine. He taught Chet these tips.

Training commenced with ground school. Classes were held at the Pensacola Mainside complex and included celestial navigation, radio communication procedures, and aircraft recognition. He and Chet studied the rules and principles of flight, flight procedures, history of the Navy and all navies. They pored over *Stick and Rudder* and they quizzed each other. They took a class about how to reduce flight data into graphs and charts, using algebra and calculus. With his engineering studies and math skills, Sandy excelled, but helped his classmates when they needed it. He was glad to see that some of them turned to Chet, who was also good in math.

They learned or relearned about drag, lift, and thrust. Despite the jet age advancing, they were trained on propeller-driven planes—that suited Sandy fine. They were passed on pre-flight and commenced primary flight training at Whiting Field. Their training planes were stalwart SNJs, dual cockpit trainers, with the trainee in the back, and the trainer, all World War II vets, in the

forward. They communicated by radios—and Sandy, with his engineering background, suggested a few innovations to improve the sound and volume, which worked, and was adopted by the other trainers. Sandy learned, and learned again, from his instructor, and by his own good sense, that flying was not inherently dangerous—even engine failure could be dealt with. But there was zero tolerance for bold, wild maneuvers; no goddam hotdogging. Fly cautiously, fly well. Don't duke it out with weather. In some four hundred hours of flight practice, day and night, Sandy lost any inclination, deliberate or not, to make decisions based on poor judgement, clumsiness, fear, recklessness, sloppiness. His age and experience helped him believe in this, but it was training that turned the belief into behavior and then nearly an instinct.

Outside the cockpit: Sandy also paid attention to “conduct and bearing.” In his first enlistment, Sandy always sought good standards of appearance, if anything to deny or forget the cast-off clothing and handed down stuff, including socks and shoes, from the boys' home. It was another way to keep officers off his back. Gallagher had remarked on it, appreciating, as he always did, the stuff that Sandy did right. He did this right again and helped Chet turn out well in their work khakis, dress blues, summer whites and working greens. They were the best looking duo in their class, which caused some comment, friendly, joking and nasty.

Sandy, with his engineering background, on the line in the air, and in classrooms, kept his ears tuned to what he could about aeronautical developments, which the Navy was helping to spearhead as it retained, against some howls of the Air Force, the “right” and the need to fly—off carriers! He knew the Navy had flyers and good ones; his last sort of action in England involved a coordinated operation between the AAF and the Navy. But he had not realized how the Navy had developed jet power well before victory in 1945. In 1943 the Navy had ordered development of a jet that could be catapulted off the decks of a carrier, though finally admitting that landing the jet demanded larger, longer, more specifically designed carriers. Despite such progress, the war ended before the prototype went into real production; only 66 of the FR-1 were made, and an order for 1100 more was cancelled after the bomb seemed to make conventional warfare obsolete. The FR-1 proved too delicate to land consistently successfully on carriers and was replaced by the FJ-1 nicknamed “Fury.” With British innovations leading the way, this jet had greater success, but other operational failures led to yet a third jet aircraft design, this time a product of Orion, the G-79, which developed into other prototypes. Along the way, engines were tried out, wings were modified and strengthened; vertical fins were changed; wingspans thickened to withstand thrust...and this was all before 1946! Sandy noted how many times Orion was mentioned and he recalled, back in May 1945, hearing whining coming out of those wind tunnels that were off limits.

The current state of the art was the swept-wing design, the Sabre. Sandy was intrigued with all this, but his close-up encounter with the Bell helicopter in the Sierras got him really studying

the S-51, the first really successful helicopter for military purposes. He was intrigued by the helicopter's ability to hover and vertically maneuver. By 1950, this model had morphed into the Hos-31, or affectionately known as "Horse." Ugly you bet; but the thing could fly, and get places and do things that conventional planes could not. He recalled Crusard's words about space flight—comic books had interstellar craft that looked like really cool planes, but he said that conventional aircraft design was not the thing for space...

After primary training, came another set of challenges: which led up to flying solo. The moment would come soon, but they didn't know when. One night Chet came into their two-man room after night-flying, and sat down on his bunk. Sandy was sound asleep though sitting up. *Stick and Rudder* was open on his lap. Chet then noted their two bottles of Scotch, side by side on the shelf near the door. The bottles were a gift for their instructors after a successful solo.

Chet then slid to the floor and knelt in prayer, silently, as his roommate was sleeping. He had admired how Sandy could sleep, but he also knew that his roommate had trained himself to do so when he was on duty with the Eighth over Europe, and just inured himself to the idea of dying...he, Chet had not, at least in the air. Growing up in the delta, violence and death lurked all around in the shape of white men and although Chet had never been touched by a friend's or family's lynching, there had been one in the next county. Yet they were always alert to the sound of distant car, and to the silencing of crickets...were people approaching the house?... this feeling never left him, even when he attended college in Ohio, one of the three black students on the campus. And when exhaustion crept close, he reminded himself how he frequently made do with two or three hours of sleep, as he kept a fifty-hour a week job at a department store on the loading dock, and maintained an A average in his classes, which included demanding engineering courses. On Saturday night he was the gopher at a restaurant, working till three in the morning, and going to mass before getting home for some sleep but he was the loading dock by four in the afternoon.

He prayed for continued strength, for persistence, to make his family proud... "In the name of your Son, I humbly ask this," he finished and crossed himself. Before the last word was uttered, Sandy suddenly shouted, and lifted himself up, flailing sheets and pillows, the book smashing to the floor—and he followed.

Chet snapped on the light and stared at him... "Towel," the now awake Sandy gasped, and Chet snatched the neatly folded towel at the foot of the bunk and Sandy neatly threw up in it. "You're not okay," Chet said, taking the towel and throwing it into their sink. "No," Sandy agreed, getting back onto his bunk. "But that's an old dream."

"What about?" Chet asked. "My mama always had us tell about dreams that scared us."

Sandy was blotting his face with the sheets. "I dream it every so often. Had to do with a stupid incident in the war. It really once and for all taught me to hold my big goddam mouth."

Chet could see that all he wanted to say. "How about you getting some sleep, huh? I need it too." He cancelled the usual feeling of doing what a white man said. "We both need it, but...I'm tired of feeling scared and not being able to talk about it. So, I'm terrified."

"Yeah, well, I am too."

Chet showered and returned to their room where Sandy was lying awake. He once again told himself not to be scared of talking with a guy with white skin; but even the most friendly and welcoming professors at Ohio could not gain his full confidence.

Or asking questions. "What have you got to be scared about? This flying, this proving yourself a man in the service must be an old story to you."

"Yeah, but a new plot line. In the first plot I just wanted to grow the hell up and not have to depend on anybody, and if I died, I died. The second story—I found people that I wanted to be proud of me. And this time I want to live...we both got women back home—I figured that would never happen to me, but it did. But you Chet—I can't stand in your shoes, but I know you got eyes on you waiting for you to foul up so it proves something."

"Yeah." They cut the light, trying to wedge in four hours before reveille. But talk took over...In the dark, Sandy confessed his dream originated in his being thrown out of a plane, wounded...and as he lay on the ground in France, drifting in and out of consciousness, knowing he was dying, how he silently yelled at himself, because this was own damned fault...but the guy who did it had problems too. "It ended well. The guy and I even apologized to each other. But I blame myself for the incident."

"I can top that. I was waiting at an intersection with my wife... and a car full of white guys stopped and threw mud and worse at me. And you know...I blamed myself for it?—if I feel that way, God, if I don't make it here—"

"We both will. We have to."

Three days later, at Pace Field, both men were practicing touch and go landings. Then, mid-morning, Sandy's instructor climbed out and said, "Take her up." Sandy calmly nodded, took off, and for twenty minutes flew solo and then landed. But he was sopping with sweat as he clambered out of his SNJ. He later learned it was Chet's day too, and he had the same reaction success, the same reaction.

Later, with cut neckties still around their necks—a tradition of the Navy—they compared notes. Both flights, about twenty minutes long, had been completely uneventful. They both then sought out their instructors and handed over the bottles of scotch.

Despite their success, they both knew they were entering the most critical stage of training. As their skills increased, so did expectations. Intolerance of any kind of error increased, and washing out loomed higher and more loathsome. Pilot fear was only increased when they were told that “washouts” came without warning labels. A trainee might excel in all things during primary training, but stumble and tailspin with acrobatics, gunnery, night flying, formation, and carrier qualifications. All the pilots worked and sweated and studied, and their fears came out in different ways, but all had the same feeling: don’t let the other guy know. Except for Sandy and Chet who told each other everything...until their wives arrived.

They both arrived in early June, at separate times, and their coming was well planned for: both men had secured married quarters. Sandy was reading a magazine in the day room of their ops when the inexpressibly happy Chet came in, holding his daughter Maria Jane in one arm, and clasping his wife’s shoulders with the other—other things were on their minds and after greeting her, and saying that his wife was also a teacher, Sandy let them go to their real reunion.

Two days later, Margaret arrived. Her husband waited for her at the airport, unnoticed as his summer whites were common. But Margaret gaped at him when she came through the gate. “My God, you’re gorgeous!” she cried, not caring that anybody heard her, and she said little else as they embraced and kissed so deeply their faces hurt and his cap lay on the floor. Later that night, after their own breathtaking reunion in their married quarters which he had moved into only 36 hours before she arrived, he had to ask, “Any problems...?”

“No,” she fibbed. There had been no other problems or odd events since those four terrible days in January...and she let it go at that, for the moment. She had three weeks and a few days alone with her man, and she was going to make excellent use of the three weeks they had before...she pushed away the thought.

Even though Sandy was deeply focused on his training, Margaret remained joyful just being with her man. She enjoyed Florida, which was close to California in many ways; she enjoyed meeting the other pilots and their wives, she enjoyed the sight, while hanging laundry, of planes streaking overhead, and most of all enjoyed Sandy walking in the door of the utilitarian quarters: kitchen, living room, bathroom, bedroom. They had made immediate use of that room and well too. Margaret could catch herself blushing at times, and proud that she was responsive as he was to her. And thank goodness, no pregnancy, though they had been deliriously unprotected in front of the fire in that Sierra mansion. They made sure of protection

this time. There were new ways and methods now, and Margaret and the other wives had to discuss the matters... "Be sure to unfold it," a pregnant wife told her.

As for Sandy, wife or no wife, flying went on. They were flying formation and gunnery and next was carrier qualifications: to land a jet on the deck of a carrier. He had to qualify even though he was being a little old fashioned...in longing for a good old fashioned bomber. He had heard Joe say more than once, there's nothing like having a good solid platform underneath you...even though Joe was damned good with his P-51.

In that three weeks and two days of married life in Pensy, Sandy and Margaret had a great time, one of the best near month of their married lives, they recalled later. Margaret even enjoyed the classes she was "advised" to attend as a wife of a soldier; these ranged from how to write a check and balance a checkbook to learning how to support the pilot husband, and one way was a good breakfast: oatmeal, eggs, and bacon. She faithfully got up before dawn's early light to prepare; Sandy ate with gusto, and sometimes thanked her by a very quick trip the bedroom. There were other classes for their edification and for their amusement; she learned about ceramics and actually made a plate with an old English coaching scene on it, which she kept as a souvenir of a happy time....but it always stayed in a closet.

The married pilots, an identity Sandy liked the sound of, threw frequent dinner parties that went the rounds; the wife would fix pasta, and the guests would bring the sauce, the rolls, the salad, and the Jello dessert and one in particular always brought the beer that he and his wife made in their broom closet. Maria Jane had more than a few friends; other babies were laid out in the beds to sleep, awake, cry, be fed, while the parents ate, told stories and played bridge. Sandy frequently made high, which he attributed to Irene's tutoring, back in the late winter of 1945. Margaret played a good round of bridge as well, and delighted in meeting the other Navy wives who were all dealing with worry, pride, fear, babies, unexpected pregnancies, and their husbands' desires to fly jets off the decks of carriers.

Sandy admitted to the desire, because he was a naval aviator. That stunt put Air Force guys in the shade; the Navy pilot was king of the "low and slow" approach when both the controls and the aircraft itself is not as responsive as it could be. More than a few pilots, practicing this maneuver, noticed that not only were cars were going faster than their planes, but kid on a bicycle, if he were really laying it on, could pedal faster! Sandy knew that carrier qualification did not automatically place him on an aircraft carrier and he did not mind; four years of harsh war in European skies—which a lot of the guys admired him for and dug around for stories of which he was sparing—diluted any vision of himself as the heroic guy in the silk scarf fluttering from this throat. Or toggling bombs. Or diving hell for leather at the "enemy." And, thank God, there was no enemy at the moment, at least one to be driving hell for leather at.

He and Margaret showed another kind of courage when inviting Charles Labourie and his wife to a mutual graduation party at a popular restaurant a few blocks away from the main gate. Wisely, Sandy called ahead to tell them—not ask them—that a Negro aviator and his wife were coming to dinner. The manager dithered, accepted, reneged, and then accepted when Sandy said, “All right, you lose business. So, does anybody win?” Dinner went very well, though both couples noted that they were more than discreetly screened by plants and a half-wall. But they arrived and left directly through the dining area, not meeting anybody’s eyes, and so silently challenged the clients to accept it. The manager actually said goodbye to them—graciously, but with some relief. But, in the future, other Negro pilots and their wives ate there, without question.

A few days later, Sandy and Chet, with thirteen others, were given their Golden Wings, with their wives pinning them on their chests. Margaret was calm as she pinned them on, but then started crying. A few other wives did as well, and Sandy felt his own eyes burning. They had made it! But more was to come, and the next step was Corpus Christi, Texas.

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On the morning of July 24, just after their transfer to Corpus Christi, Margaret was notified there was a telegram for her. She knew what it meant—for one, their nearly three weeks alone were over. When Sandy arrived later, she served dinner, sat down and said, “We have a visitor coming.” Taken off guard—and then shocked—Sandy immediately looked at her belly—which was completely flat. “A visitor eight years old. Name of Gordon.”

“Gordon?”

Before he had a chance to fully take this in, Margaret rushed on. “His mother and her husband are dead. And pretty shockingly too.”

“Well, uh—permission, we need permission to get a kid here—“

“It has been arranged.” This was the first time there had been even an oblique referral to their secret lives which had connections with higher-ups who could take care of things.

Sandy found the whisky, and knocked one back. He knocked a few more as she related what she had been allowed to relate.

He listened, perfectly sober as she related the concocted story that at least explained why Gordon was coming. Boblice had been after her, Margaret, for months. For that few minutes she was alone while Sandy went to the store, he had attacked her in the cottage. Gordon had discovered them—thank God, he had prevented that Boblice from going any further... Her face changed so much that Sandy noticed.

“Yes, yes...?”

Boblice then went on to murder Duvina. And then disappeared. Gordon was left on his own.

"You didn't tell me this," Sandy said, idiotically.

"You had important work to accomplish. I wanted a near month with you, all to myself. Without any other distractions including an eight year old coming our way. Gordon was all alone. It was learned his real dad died in some prison about three years ago and pretty violently—but had been sent to prison for manslaughter, he killed a prostitute—"

"Couldn't your parents...?"

"My parents will take him back in September," she said, to his relief which he did not try to hide.

"Well, God knows I owe your parents—"

"Dad's not too crazy about you right now." She did not speak how Arnold had begged her to run away, get away, and then how her dad was kind of proud of her when she told him, no.

Sandy took a breath... "Two months before Gordy goes home?"

"Yes."

"All right...when does he arrive?"

"Tomorrow, June 25."

"God help us. I kind of feel like Pearl Harbor on December 6."

The next day, Sandy always recalled as the advent of the Korean War—and the coming of Gordon. "Which was worse," he joked later, and a bit grimly, "I was never quite sure."

June 25, 1950

After a year of military provocations by both sides along the 38th Parallel, with President Rhee more than once threatening invasion, North Korea sent an invasion force into South Korea. An estimated 50,000 Northerners attacked the American-sponsored Republic of South at dawn yesterday, driving deep past the 38th parallel, the UN-established boundary between the two areas. Northern forces overwhelmed the ill-equipped defenders and capture Seoul in three days. The United Nations condemned the attack and creates a "police" force to help defend South Korea. Ground forces soon learned the North Koreans were no barbaric ill-trained guerilla units; they were led by battle-hardened veterans of the Chinese communist offensive. By July 10, 3000 inexperienced US troops were dead. The only thing that saved the day and upheld the UN front was control of the air by Naval Air Forces. But this too would be challenged.

Harvey and Melva: Where Ignorant Armies Clash by Night

In mid-January, Harvey and Melva returned to Providence, in joy, vomiting episodes, and a sense of much work needing to be done. Calling on his faithful cousin Will Stovall, Harvey partnered him with Melva to begin the process of putting the house up for sale, as well as packing and moving. He was far from idle: not only was he charged with establishing the new law college, he also had the Mahoney court martial to prepare for. He was away from home for days at a time, but took pleasure in his wife's pleasure in her new life and their new life within her, even when interrupted by her running for the bathroom. They talked nightly when he was away, phone bills be damned.

Hard and determined work put a rosy face on the Mahoney court martial: the CID had conducted an investigation of the area where Buckhouse had met the man, and had found "Benny" – dead. The ledge the man had lodged under had crumbled— the crack initiating the event had probably been the effect of bombing during the war and smoke and moisture had done the rest. The investigating crew had gone through the area before, but finally an odor of a decomposing body crawled up a searcher's nose. Poking into a pile of broken rock revealed a green knit GI cap...and the body was finally uncovered. No dog tags. Harvey was dismayed by the man's death yet knew that his presence there supported Buckhouse's testimony of meeting an AWOL soldier in 1948. He was soon on the phone, and Merriwether, who stopped the conversation, and returned the call on a scrambled line. Yes, the body had been removed and placed under the authority of the US Army of Occupation. An autopsy reported it was a tall man with broad shoulders. Negro. Dental records were being checked to confirm his identity. Fine, but what was really needed was a picture of the poor guy to show his size and his broad shoulders.

His phone calls and other communications with his anxious defendant at Fort Leavenworth caught up Harvey with a familiar name: Vernon Walter Chapman. He had escaped and whereabouts unknown. Harvey made a slight face at the name, recalling Chapman-- a good flight engineer but some itch—whether boredom, a desire to make trouble, get money--drove him to stealing side arms there at the 918th. Found out, he tried to escape on a hijacked B-17, inadvertently taking a Norden bombsite with him. Joe, in his P-51, and with help from the Jones brothers whom Chapman had hijacked with the plane, brought them back to England. Sandy had been grimly pleased when the guy got his "comeuppance" for he had been a target of Chapman's abuse. Chapman's toadies had kind of disappeared into the ranks after their smug leader was removed, court martialed and sent to Leavenworth.

By March first, they moved from Providence to Bassingbury. Melva's first three months of morning sickness vanished like a bad dream, and at the moment she was happy in fixing up their new three bedroom single story home for themselves and the new arrival, due in late July. Their house was in Fitzjon Heights, a fresh subdivision on Bassingbury's eastern borders. The expanding college needed more housing for its employees, some of whom had to lodge in Archer's Run and other villages. Notably, Fitzjon was "unrestricted." The name? The building group, a three man crew of former GIs, had been unable to secure loans for their business, but

Ursula had listened to their plans, saw their blue prints, examined all their permits, and funded their start up efforts. Melva and Harvey's was the first home that had been built, and yes, it was a bit raw, but they moved into it as soon as they could, and Ursula sent her decorator to help with curtains and painting. Maple trees were spared or replanted around the house. Only one third of Harvey's furniture could fit into their smaller home, and he and Melva happily donated it to younger couples who needed beds, chairs, and tables; one thing they kept was the grandfather clock and, upon Melva's insistence, Mike's bedroom suite. They bought a brand new bedroom suite for themselves, and borrowed a nursery set and a high chair. Though neither he nor Melva said a word, they were both anxious about successfully completing her pregnancy, in late June or early July.

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On a warm June evening, Harvey strode tiredly along the sidewalk to the law college building, due to open for classes in two months, September 8. The new college was actually a former movie theatre and office building about three blocks from the original teacher college's campus, so it had great seating for lecture. The upper floors were being turned into classroom and offices for teachers and administrators, still being recruited. Ursula O'Brien and he were working day and at times at night to open on the date, but it was still hair raising.

For the last three weeks Harvey felt as though he were back at the 918th at the worst part of the war, when every nut and bolt was precious, and officers and crewmembers were learning their work minute by minute in flak-strewn skies or in frantic repairs on the ground, which Frank Savage came in and solved—brutally, harshly, but successfully. Harvey often thought of that remarkable man as he, and others, worked day and night for their September opening...applications were already coming in.

Harvey's teeth clenched. The Board of Regents was demanding that applicants send a picture of themselves to completely identify his race—or her race, Ursula snapped. Word was, Harvey was not surprised to hear, that board members didn't want colored students or women in their law school. There were plenty such colleges down south and women lawyers were still a rarity. Bassingbury was also unsettled about the idea of blacks coming into "their town." Even the Fitzjon foundation could not assuage these concerns, but Ursula refused to be "blackmailed" as she put it— some rumors said that the City Hall suggested if the foundation built a new public pool and pool house then the citizens might be more amenable, but Ursula only sniffed, "It would be segregated too." She was not popular with certain parties in the town, but she didn't care. She and Harvey stood their ground but began learning more about how women suffered gender prejudice at times as severe as racial prejudice. Good God, what did that to Negro women...?

But, Harvey openly admitted to himself, these were issues overshadowed by Byron Mahoney. Only five days remained before he and Harvey would appear in a special room in the Pentagon, in a closed session, but outside would be ranks of reporters, many white, and many black, and

many others with mixed emotions. Rumors were that reporters for Life magazine were to be present. President Truman was interested in the final ruling; and the Pentagon, while not pleased, was still anxious to please the president and interested senators; there were some in those mighty halls that sincerely preached integration; it was time, dammit; we look like Nazi Germany if we don't give up racial prejudice.

With Jonathon Buckhouse giving testimony, and an Army Graves Registration doctor providing information about "Benny" the court martial should be a cinch. But Harvey and other interested parties backed up any point they could, including promoting the deceased Benny as capable of rape. A distasteful but critical step was to involve the man's mother, Mrs. Ronalds, who lived in a "holler" in Tennessee. She had been hard to find but JAG personnel traced her down, and Harvey took three difficult trains to interview her. He walked up a sinister path to her fragile home, followed by a wide-eyed stenographer from the college. Responding to his kind voice and eyes, Mrs. Ronalds did not deny that her son, whom she knew was dead, could have done such a violent thing. Her older and younger boys, they were good boys, but Benny in the middle was different. Sad different and then bad different. She then showed him a photograph of her middle son: standing next to his mother, he towered over her, and his shoulders were unmistakably broad. Yes, sir, he got scared at thunderstorms. Real scared. After his older brother taunted him about his fear, Benny nearly killed him. She was understandably reluctant to come to the court martial for direct testimony, but Harvey told her that the accused, Byron Mahoney, was a fine officer and a fine man, and he could hang... She admitted, cautiously, that Benny was accused of raping a girl down the holler. After charging him with his rape, the girl then withdrew the charge, but that was by pressure from her folks.

Buckhouse had been interviewed by both sides, by phone, and in person. When Harvey finally got calls through, Buckhouse was sounding more and more reluctant about what he had to do—and to Harvey's queries if he were being threatened, the young man would say no, all was well. Harvey was perfectly confident in Buckhouse's desire to defend Mahoney—and his voice, in combination with documented evidence of the Benny he described—was needed as attention mounted on this landmark case. Grimly, Harvey mailed Jonathon his airline ticket, which would take him from Birmingham and to Washington National Airport. Unfortunately, Harvey had to make sure that TWA accepted black passengers. He confirmed and reconfirmed Jonathon's coming, in two days.

The work, the planning, the phone calls, the writing were coming together. But Harvey had a nagging feeling that something would go wrong—a holdover from his adjutant days...He climbed the steps to the third floor—the elevator company was still on in its way to get the old lift dependably functioning—and entered his office and took pleasure in having no pains in his chest, but he was damp with sweat as advancing summer sizzled the humidity up. Now seven o'clock, he found the door to his office open, the lights on, and Erika Bridgestone waiting for him.

“Sorry,” she said.

He locked the door, and checked to make sure the curtains were shut. “Well?” he asked, but gently. And worriedly. Clearly, she was not happy to be there, but they both smiled at each other as old acquaintances who had confronted danger together.

From a leather folder on her lap, she extracted a typed document and presented it to him. He sat down to read it.

It was on onion paper, and the somewhat askew keys had plunked too lightly on the crinkled texture. But Harvey could make out the message. He was being “requested” to withdraw from the defense of Byron Mahoney. “Were you threatened to deliver this?”

“I’d rather not say.”

“The armed forces have no power over me, which is where this threat originates. Not surprising, considering how many Army officers are still fighting integration of the ranks. But how are you being threatened?”

She stuck a cigarette in her mouth and Harvey found a match, struck and lighted it for her and pushed an ashtray across the desk. “It’s my father.”

“What?”

“They’re holding him hostage—or rather, his secret’s the hostage.”

“Ah?”

“My parents are Canadian. I was born in Kansas, after my parents moved there. I realized now that he never talked about why they left. I talked with my mother after this letter was given to me. My father went to Europe in World War I. He was...cashiered for cowardice at the battle of the Somme. He left Canada in shame and moved his wife to Kansas to Emporia—he had been trained as a printer and he set up a shop and did well.” She puffed on her cigarette while Harvey waited. “It makes sense. I wanted to visit Canada when I was kid, and when I asked about going there, my father always had some excuse. We never received any mail or visits from relatives, nothing...”

“I’m sorry about that. But I refuse to give up on Byron Mahoney.”

“I don’t you to. But I am also to...issue you an offer...from the same party.”

“An offer?”

"The unnamed source...said he could tell you what happened to your son, Mike—if you cooperated."

"Well...the laugh's on him. I don't want to know."

"No...?"

"Perhaps my son was involved with something wrong."

"I can't imagine that," Erika said.

"War changes people—have you gotten into personal contact with this—contact?"

"A voice, over a telephone. A message drop. Like something out of the movies."

"Can you contact the courier?" At her nod, Harvey said, "Tell him we want...to meet his boss."

"If he refuses?"

"A bribe's worked before. What can you put up?"

"Two hundred." Harvey put up \$75.00. "Maybe it will be earnest money, but it will be worth it."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"We could protect your dad...and protect my son and maybe expose the bastard who's doing this. At the end, we protect Byron Mahoney."

Together they wrote a note for the courier, and Erika placed it in her purse. After she left, Harvey stayed seated in his leather chair, which had been bought, he understood, from a government warehouse and it reminded him of Savage's chair, which became Joe's chair and a chair he finally came to occupy too.

He was late and due home. Mulling, mulling, mulling, he walked the increasingly familiar sidewalk to their home, and when he saw its lighted windows, he stopped, finishing his theory before entering into a home where he had a wife suitably distracted with making a home for him and the coming baby. Her tummy was rounding and it was beautiful as she tended to dinner....

But he was still mulling. Somebody wanted to hold up integration but would not publicly announce such. This somebody would exchange favors with another general or a significant officer who had the power and the connections to do such things...like blackmail Erika Bridgestone over her father's misfortunes, and counting on Harvey's kindness to the young woman and sentiment about his son. Wouldn't work.

Two taut days later—three days before the Mahoney court martial--Harvey was walking to the commons for lunch, and saw Erika perched on a stone bench facing the quad. He continued walking until he reached the commons and while he stood in line at the cafeteria, saw Erika drawing a cup of coffee. She came up to him, and charmingly identified herself as a reporter; could she have an interview? Harvey nodded and they sat down at an empty table. While Erica scribbled lines on her pad they consulted... "The drop provided an address. I've already checked on it; it's a rental home in Gaithersburg, Maryland. A check with a real estate agency identified that a Perry Keene is the inhabitant."

With Erika dropping the message, Harvey identified a meeting date, two days away.

They made arrangements to drive to Gaithersburg the next afternoon. "Business with Ursula and the foundation," he told Melva. "Okay," she said, becoming used to the Americanism. She decided to keep her own news quiet until after the court martial.

**

The property was a cottage barely visible between a Victorian monstrosity and a more recent ranch-style home; it was set back on sloping ground. Heavy bushes and ivy had crawled over its bricks. Harvey and Erika, waiting quietly in her car, observed no lights or movements. A postal carrier duly delivered mail, thrusting it through a slot in the door. Harvey was armed with his old service pistol that he dug out of his locked GI footlocker, stored in the garage. They both wondered what else they should have for their own safety.

Finally, he said "It's dark. Let's go." They emerged from the car and eased the doors shut. They walked a pre-selected route: down the street, then circled back to approach the fenceless house by the back. Harvey recalled how he and Joe, shot down and on foot, approached, more rapidly than they should, that farmhouse in Normandy, and found the cellar...

The back door was unlocked. They entered into a kitchen. Harvey flicked his flashlight on for a few moments to give them some guidance. There were three doors to choose from: closet, basement stairs, hallway. They passed down the hallway to the foyer. Harvey noted letters on the floor, from the mail chute. He picked up one and found it addressed to Perry Keene. The living room opened to the left. They entered, with Harvey flicking a light over the furniture.

"Halt."

They halted. The voice came from a wing chair turned away from them. "I have a gun. I suppose you do too. If you don't fire, I won't either."

"All right," Harvey said.

A body stood up and a flashlight shone up into the face.

“Well, hello,” Harvey said. The face belonged to Thibodeaux, or Tib. Knew him well.

**

“Fancy meeting you here...and other stale phrases. And you too, Miss Bridgestone.” This was said after Erika asked if the bathroom was working. They both visited it, and returned to the livingroom. The lights were switched on, and the drapes completely pulled. “Another stale phrase...let’s put our cards on the table.”

“You first,” Harvey said.

“Okay. Miss Bridgestone, you have long been shadowed and Harvey, you’re always on the radar. When you made contact with Harvey, our interest came up, rapidly. We followed you. This house seemed to be object of your interest, so I took the opportunity of investigating. Your cards?”

“First, who’s ‘we’?” Harvey asked.

“I report to Creighton.” That is all he said.

Harvey dealt his cards. He told Tib their story until “I smell smoke,” Erika said, suddenly. “For real.”

The kitchen had been quietly set on fire and the door was blocked. Another fire had been started at the front of the house. Tib had the situation in hand. “Come on, down into the basement.” He pulled out a revolver and a flashlight. They moved carefully down the steps into the thick cold of the earth-walled cellar. Tib led them to the coal chute.

“Keep your heads down,” he instructed them, and they crawled up the filthy chute. Tib pushed the doors up and they escaped. Too easily, Harvey thought and yes, a pistol blasted at them.

More firing; Harvey fell on Erika and covered her until he heard Tib saying in a harsh, low voice, “Help me.” Harvey looked up. Tib was wrestling with a body. “Come on, come on,” he said and Harvey grabbed the legs and they flung him into the back seat. They all piled into the front seat. Tib took the wheel and did not surge the car into the street which was beginning to fill with people and other cars; rather, he backed out into the sloping darkness. Driving the car at a terrific angle, he plowed through a creek and up a hill.

He then turned, easily and politely, onto a paved street, and drove between the lighted globes of street lamps. They came to a more populated thoroughfare. Turning on it, he drove until Gaithersburg’s lights diminished. He then turned off the road, sliding the car behind a copse of

trees. The car stopped at a disconcerting angle. Tib got out and shone a flashlight onto the face of the body, crumpled on the right side of the back seat. The light picked out a growing stain on the shirt.

“Ugh,” Erika said after giving it a quick glance. Harvey also barely looked at it. Tib put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Harvey, let’s get this body in the trunk.”

They did so. Tib, without Harvey at first realizing it, took the wheel with new vigor and a sense of purpose. They reviewed the affair; Perry Keene had been identified as a sixty year old widower, a bank officer, on vacation with his sisters in Maine. “Harvey, I agree with Erika,” Tib said. “I sure can’t see any son of yours getting mixed up with some kind of adventure...but well, yeah, war can change people, but still...”

“Thanks,” Harvey said. “But the real victim here is going to be Byron Mahoney.”

“Were we being drawn there to be killed?” Erika asked.

“Perhaps. Probably.”

“Have we tripped anything?” Harvey asked, staring through the windshield, down the dark road, eyes following the broken white stripe.

“If you have...it’s in our favor. That body may be the beginning.”

“By the way...where the hell are we going?”

“You’ll find out. Let’s get some coffee.” Tib pulled the car next to all-night diner on Route 81. A phone line attached it to the outside world, and Tib after calmly ordering a cup of java to be pulled from the glass urn, calmly entered the booth and made a phone call. He came out and sat at the counter and ordered a few sinkers. After a few sips of coffee, Harvey reluctantly headed for the phone booth.

It took a while to get a phone call through to Melva. It was snatched up after the first ring and Melva’s voice surged over the wire...thready with static and with her fear. “Sweetheart, no answers at this time,” Harvey said to her, both firmly, and pleadingly. “A man may leave the army, but the army doesn’t always leave the man. You have to take that at face value. I will be home tonight.”

“Do so or don’t come home!” she flashed...and then apologized. “Oh, my dear, come home when you can and I hope it’s soon...I have wonderful news.”

“Well, it can’t be another baby,” Harvey joked, his voice warm and sweet.

“No, but just as fine. Dear God, do hurry home.”

Harvey joined them at the glistening counter and enjoyed his coffee. During the warm night he had unbuttoned and rolled up his shirtsleeves.

“What’s that?” Tib asked Harvey. He pointed to a small mark on his left forearm.

Harvey shrugged. “I don’t know. I figured it might have got in the war. I flew more than a few times.” He was not tired enough to wonder about Tib’s curiosity, but tired enough to inquire further.

**

Harrisburg Pennsylvania was their general destination; Tib drove through the moderately sized city and then, on the other side of the Susquehanna River, took a side road that slid off parallel to the highway. The route was dark but the open car windows let in the smell and the sound of the broad river.

Tib said “There.”

They saw three gray buildings that quietly draped over several bluffs overlooking the river. It was a VA hospital; the building had originally been a tuberculosis sanatorium, but new medication had ended its use, and its endowers were happy to grant it to the United States government. They passed through two guarded gates, and Tib and his “guests” were stopped three times by men in uniform before the car stopped and they climbed out. After a few moments, a guard came up, took the car, and drove it away.

Harvey and Erika had been led away by a friendly but firm young guard, and they were gamely if tastelessly eating breakfast in a small utilitarian dining room when Tib came in. “The chief medical officer wants to see you,” he said. “Mam, wait here.” Erika nodded, looking better for having some food. Harvey was led from the dining room down several small glistening hallways and sensed he was heading into a part of the hospital that veterans would not be found in. He was ushered into a room in which a plate glass window provided a view into a surgical theatre. It was ice cold. Harvey could see the breath of the two doctors blowing out in clouds.

Two men were busy over the body. After twenty minutes, the men covered the body with a sheet which they drew out of a container of dry ice. They came out of the glassed-in theatre and joined them. One pulled off his mask and said, “Harvey, have you forgiven me for shaving off all your hair after you got clobbered over Regensburg back in early 1945?”

“Doc Kaiser?—Don!” Harvey seized and shook the hand of the sweetly homely Donald Aaron Kaiser, whose skills, steady nerves and good sensible heart helped many men survive and get well, both physically and emotionally—him too, Harvey remembered. Kaiser’s distinctive face

still wore its knowing smile; his wiry graying hair had gone white. Harvey suddenly felt immensely better...but...

“In person. Well, Harv, how are you?—and I know such phrases may seem a little, uh, weak under these circumstances.”

“I’m fine, I guess...but what are you doing here?” Tib’s wave of a hand told them to go ahead and talk.

“Briefly, I got this job because I was involved already—you remember when Joe and Sandy, and Joe’s wife returned from Yugoslavia with the scientists? I was involved in their processing, and then got ordered to study the long term effects of whatever it was they had been dealing with. Long before I prepared to resign and go back to being a GP in New Jersey, it was strongly suggested that I stay with the Army.”

“For what?”

Kaiser consulted Tib with his eyes. Harvey could see he was involved in a situation in which rank had no bearing on whatever the hell was going on. “For high level medical affairs.” He then picked up a clipboard. “The body you brought to this facility is not human. The heart has seven chambers, and is in the region of the stomach. The lungs are half the size of human beings. The blood is iron-based but so anemic that a conventional human body could not survive. Another great difference: the brain. There is a bullet in the head, and this would have killed a human body. Because the way the brain is disposed in the cranium, it did not kill him.”

“Then it’s not quite human,” Tib said...recalling, silently, how a body with a bullet in its head had escaped from the Whitfield residence, months earlier. The body, which had carried the name of Polebiate, had been trying to kill Margaret...and the body, still alive had tried to kill Harvey Stovall.

Harvey was assembling how many times he had heard “not quite human”—a dim painting in All Saints Bakewell, the words of a resolute sergeant facing court martial for dereliction of duty, from a pilot’s eye witness account of...invaders? He said the word aloud.

“I think not,” said Tib. “Meaning, invaders suggest violence and pillage...how could such an invasion gone unnoticed—not recorded at least by conventional sources.”

“Maybe there’s not enough of them...”

“But why the hell was he trying to kill me?—us?”

Kaisers said, “Harvey, what’s that on your arm? Your inner arm?”

Harvey looked and saw nothing. Kaiser put on his glasses and said, "You have one too."

"Have one what?"

"That mark is a tiny triangle—you've never noticed it?"

"Ah...well, without my glasses...I guess I never bothered to look at it closely. Hm it is a triangle."

"What's your interest?" asked Tib.

"Joe Gallagher has the same mark," said Kaiser. "I found it when he was being prepared for air-evack from England. Alexander Komansky had one too."

"What?" Harvey asked.

"I found it when you ordered him sent back to the States. I checked him over before he left. Found one just like Gallagher's, same size and color and placement when I was giving him an exam before he got air evacked."

"Why didn't you report on this?" Harvey said.

"What would I have said and to whom?"

"You must have wondered, something—"

"Am I now suspected too?" Kaiser inquired of Tib. "And of what?"

"Okay, okay. Okay, Doc, apologies. But surely, you must have wondered."

"Yeah, I did. But what conclusions could I come to?—and, I didn't want to contribute to gossip about Gallagher and Komansky's relationship. There were some pretty foul stories—you know what I'm talking about Harvey—and finding two identical marks on their arms..."

Tis said, with care and interest, "Any truth—"

"Not one goddamned atom," Kaiser said. "If anybody believed such stories they were either new, stupid, or envious of Joe and the Gallaghers and happy to see any kind of mud splashed on them. Harvey, did you ever hear the one that when Joe went to London to find Komansky, that time he went AWOL--it was to get him back after he went running off after a woman--?"

"Where'd you hear that story?"

"Frank Bailey told me--he heard it from some airman who had heard it from good ol' Vern Chapman." Kaiser told Tib that "Chapman was, putting it mildly, a dick who tried to hijack a B-17 with a Norden bombsite, and kidnapped two other men trying to get away after he was found selling sidearms and Leavenworth was his next stop. But, back to business. Gallagher and

Komansky have the same mark. So, what does it mean? I don't know. I don't know anything. All we have is data shall we say and it's none too clear."

"What next?" Harvey asked Tib.

"We need to talk with them...but Komansky's in naval training. And Joe's whereabouts are not completely known. Well, we'll get hold of them both. Now, I guess I take you home. Mahoney's court martial is tomorrow."

"Oh my God," Harvey said. Time had blurred, and fallen off the edge of the world.

Reports were taken, edited and signed off; Harvey and Erika passed through a gauntlet of instructions, threats, orders. Erika then was taken away, and later, Harvey learned, driven home. Finally, Harvey got Tib alone long enough to ask if he knew anything about Vernon Chapman escaping from Fort Leavenworth about a month ago. No bearing on things, Harvey said, but it seemed coincidental.

**

It was almost a relief to return his attention to Mahoney, but Harvey faced up smack into an emergency. Jonathon Buckhouse was due at Green Airport in the early afternoon. Buckhouse flying into Green Airport in Rhode Island had been a mistake—Harvey absentmindedly arranged it. But he decided not to start changing things; the young man was nervous enough and shifting travel plans would alarm him. No way could Harvey make it now to any airport he might have flown into—and he had promised on a figurative stack of Bibles that he would be waiting for Jonathon. When Harvey related his concerns to Tib, he asked, "Anybody you trust to pick him up?"

Harvey knew whom to call but was not sure what the answer would be: Theo Suttler. He could only try. He was placed in a room with a secured line and he called Pottle and Johnson in Providence, and thank the stars, he was connected with his friend, whom he called upon to remember his promise.

There was a hiss of silence while Suttler paused...and then said, understandably, "Tell me more."

Harvey explained to him that Buckhouse had not been subpoenaed; he had volunteered, but he was scared, with good reason. He, Harvey, had said he would escort him to Washington.

Theo said he would do it. "Now, when's the arrival? What do I tell him and where do I take him?"

“Theo, thanks...” He gave his old friend the information he needed, wished him godspeed and wearily climbed into the car, to return to Bassingbury, with Tib at the wheel. He closed his eyes and slept, even if uneasily.

**

Relief overcame anger when Melva heard the door open and her husband calling, “Melva? Melva!”

She wasted no time flying into his arms. He smelled three days old and his face was grayly weary but wonderful! They heard the door close behind them.

She peered over Harvey’s shoulder to see a tall, weary looking man. Harvey made brief introductions, and Melva knew not to inquire further. “Mam,” he said politely, and watched while Harvey put his hand on his wife’s cheek, and then he cradled his head on her shoulder while easing his body around her tummy.

Tib was invited to clean up. He came out to find Harvey on the telephone, but hanging it up with a worried look. “They’re not at the hotel we made arrangements for.” Harvey rubbed his tired face, sat down and then stood up. “I’m cleaning up and Tib, you have to drive me to Washington DC.”

“Fine.” Tib stretched out on the couch and went to sleep immediately.

Melva made some sandwiches for them and sought out her husband who was placing carefully ordered papers in his satchel. She appreciated how he smiled when he saw her—no mollifying smile, but one that let her know how he loved her, how he loved the little one making her so enormous, and how he needed her strength to deal with his immediate concerns, getting justice for Byron Mahoney. “With all you have prepared, surely the trial will go well, even without...this young man.”

Tib woke up an hour later, had some coffee, and they all went to the car. “Harvey, take it easy,” his wife said.

“Yes, and you take it easy,” he said, gently patting her extended abdomen. They left her standing there on the walk, and she felt as she did when her first husband left that certain day, to die two days later. The baby moved, gently—then a bit more...and seemed to settle into a nap. “God help us all,” she said, shading her eyes as the two men drove off. She suddenly realized she had not yet told him of her news. It could wait.

**

The drive was four hours if there were no problems and there weren't until they paused at a rural crossroads on the way to route 95. They waited for another car to turn. When it did not, Tib eased the car across and headed down the road, edged by the tall trees of the Connecticut countryside...and then a set of headlights hurtled up behind them.

Tib hitched his shoulders up and stared in the rearview mirror with a "hm." Harvey flung a look back, out the rear window. "Other cars drive on this road too," he said.

"Not like that," Tib said, as a chorus of honks blasted behind them. "Harvey, you still have your gun?"

"Yeah." He pulled it out and readied it.

"Ready?"

"For what—God!"

Tib jammed on the brakes while twirling the wheel; the car spun on two wheels, slammed violently on the pavement in the other lane and the car behind them zoomed by—"Hang on," Tib said, mashing down on the gas. Harvey's head went back as the car plunged into the darkness....and here came the headlights again....they fled through the crossroads with only a pause, but the pause allowed the car to zoom parallel to them.... "Duck," Tib yelled, seizing Harvey's pistol and Harvey, figuring he was going to die anyway kept his head up to see who was trying to kill them, you never know...he saw a familiar face—maybe—waving arms and then heard a shout.

"Stop!" Harvey yelled. "Stop, goddammit, Tib, stop this tank—stop, stop!"—Tib said later he didn't know Harvey knew such language. He braked, and finally stopped; their pursuer roared on, and then, way off in the gloom, they saw its brake lights burn, and then the headlights were coming for them. The car came forward and stopped. Tib stayed in the car and levelled the revolver as a figure got out—slowly—and stood in the headlights.

"THEO!"

"In person—Jonathon, you were right, get out here, buddy!"

Buckhouse came from behind the wheel and gingerly extended his hand, and Harvey grabbed and pumped it. Theo Suttler was practically babbling, telling how Buckhouse swore that was Harvey Stovall in the car opposite them at the crossroads, and they took the chance of trying to catch up with them.

“Why aren’t you in Washington—why are you here, in the boonies?” Tib demanded. Despite his experience he too was shaken up, and he took several minutes to remember to return the revolver to Harvey.

“We’ve been followed. And as far as we know, they’re watching us right now.”

Tib said “Everybody in the car. You two—Theo?—Buckhouse, split up; Harvey, you’re getting another passenger. We keep together. If you need to stop, run your windshield wipers.” Theo slid in beside Harvey who took the wheel. Buckhouse took the wheel of the second car and they both sped discreetly to 95. When on the multi-lane turnpike, they drove abreast each other.

Theo related his story to Harvey. “We saw you—there at that crossroads—I couldn’t believe my luck!—we’ve been corkscrewing around these roads trying to lose our tail; we were followed I swear the moment we left Green Airport—I didn’t know what to do except to get to Bassingbury, and maybe find out where you were.”

Tib’s car’s windshield wipers moved. He pointed at the next exit. They drove off into nearby woods, and consulted at the first turn out. “Radio announced a big pile up on this route. We’ve got to keep going and drive in from the south. Follow me.”

They left 95 and Harvey could only doggedly follow Tib down the dark road, which was both comforting and unnerving. The hours seemed to rush by as they had a deadline. At dawn, they stopped at a diner. “Out,” announced the counterman, idling at the cash register. He meant Buckhouse, who instinctively pulled back, started to leave while muttering “bring some coffee to me.”

“Get back here,” Tib ordered Buckhouse. “And you,” he said, pointing to the counterman, “four coffees and serve them here.” His knuckles rapped the counter. The man was smart enough to agree, his muttering belying the hand-lettered sign, “Thank you for your business.”

“We can never quite figure out,” said Buckhouse, “why some white people do themselves out of money by not serving us. Some places their business would double.”

Tib made a phone call and had awakened somebody...and returned to the trio with a plan for their arrival at the Pentagon: “And we got somebody in our corner if we run late. We’re covered.”

“Better be,” Harvey said. Tib took over the driving the car he and Buckhouse were in, and they went forth, cutting a few red lights in the early hours and finally were on the approach of the mighty citadel.

Harvey told himself, “Show time,” which is how some pilots described a mission: checking on gauges, taking messages, alerting the crew, waiting for flares, lights, flying, flying...IPO

reached... Military police took custody of them after they navigated their way in; identities checked; doors opened, portals pointed out...and. Coffee and some sandwiches were waiting; they gulped them without tasting. Cleaning up, straightening up; then a confident walk down corridors, gates rolling shut, elevators, and then a confident stepping down a corridor in which invited members of the press watched them, without yelling questions. Lights flashed. Harvey gazed about serenely, wondering if....

Then, seating at the tables. Nodding at Mrs. Ronalds who was well dressed, with a spring hat on her head. Standing up when the judges entered. Then Byron Mahoney was escorted in. He was thin, and his uniform sagged a bit on him. Harvey's face did not move a muscle; he had to be calm, and confident...a quick look at Jonathon Buckhouse revealed the younger man was up to his role. He was serious, calm, and gazed solemnly at the judges, arrayed in their pressed, beribboned uniforms.

**

As the saying went, a dropped pin could have been heard as the appeal rolled. The facts of the case were reviewed. Harvey then presented visual evidence – an enlarged picture of Private Benjamin Ronalds that revealed his height and broad shoulders. The autopsy further factualized his height and anatomy. Pictures were also shown of his habitation near Wiesbaden. Also, his Army experience was reviewed. AWOL since 1945. Reports were given from residents who confirmed the presence of a black man living somewhere. There was a break of an hour; Harvey gulped some water and ate a donut and wished this were over.

Mrs. Ronalds was then called. She was quiet but not humble before all the white faces staring at her with many emotions ranging from dismissiveness to eager sympathy. “My son Benjamin,” she began and told how he had not finished third grade...because he said the teacher scared him. He had tried to learn, but could not. He could not read. He worked hard at the local mill, having to walk five miles to get there, and then back, leaving before dawn, getting home after night.

“Did you worry about him going into the Army?” Harvey asked.

“Dreadful worried. But he wanted to go when he got called. Knew there was a war and wanted to be a soldier.”

“Did your son fear thunderstorms?”

“Plumb out of his head terrified. Used to hide under his bed. When his brother tried to pull him out and make him realize he was bein’ a child... Benjamin ...nearly killed him.”

“Were there other incidents?”

“When a storm broke out on his way home, some neighbors saw him pullin’ their daughter off the road...her daddy went after him with a shovel.”

The next question was very hard but she had been prepared. “Can you believe your son capable of the violent actions that Major Mahoney is accused of...?”

“Yes sir.” She looked at Mahoney, without hatred or sorrow. “I can.”

**

Recess. Food, visits to the bathroom. Hand clenching. Moments of assuredness, crossed with doubts. More doubts. Did the best you could. We all did. Hell, there could have been more...

Back in session. JAG spoke. Major Byron Mahoney was declared not guilty of the rape and attempted murder of Traudl Helmut.

**

“Let me tell you, Buckhouse was the calm one. When we knew we were being followed, he didn’t turn a hair and kept that guy behind the wheel guessing but good,” Theo announced from across the hotel room, where Byron Mahoney and his defense attorney poured strong drinks but stayed sober.

Buckhouse was not present. After they had run the gauntlet of the press, with dignified smiles that indicated “Of course” to the journalists, they had crowded into a small elevator, where Buckhouse personally and profusely apologized to Mahoney who nodded at his former subordinate, and shook his hand. Under escort, they threaded underground corridors and finally walked up a ramp where two cars were waiting. Buckhouse was taken into one, and taken to Washington National Airport to be put on a plane and flown back home. He gave Harvey an envelope before departing but only nodded when Harvey said “I will be in touch.”

Harvey and his client, the now free Mahoney, were taken, though not immediately, to a pre-arranged hotel and taken up the freight elevators. “Pre-arranged?” Mahoney said. “Sounded like the conclusion was foregone. I’m glad, I’m glad...”

Harvey rarely asked for favors, but after they were in the suite, he requested the military police who escorted them that Theo Suttler be found...and he was, and was delivered. He was giddier than the two men, who were flattened by relief and thoughts of “what now?” Theo was attempting to match his mood to theirs, but the last two days had enthralled him. “I was waiting for him at the airport holding up his name on a sheet of paper. He didn’t recognize me and even when I told him you had asked me to escort him, he had a hard time believing it until I finally told him enough things about you to get his trust. He tried to apologize—and he told me,

when we were playing Barney Oldfield that when you're a black man in a white world, fear is the number one way of staying alive."

Mahoney, a glass of whiskey in hand, took this in.

"And me—I haven't felt so alive in years!" He flung his arms out and tipped his legs up. "Scared to death, but alive, alive, alive—Mr—uh, Major Mahoney—I don't mean I've had a lot of fun with all this—well, anyway, I am so damned glad for you."

"Thank you," Mahoney said, understanding.

"What....happens now?" he asked the newly freed man.

"An acre of paperwork, in triplicate, then double it," Mahoney said. "I've already asked about reassignment...perhaps Japan. Good place to bury me for a while. We'll see. But first, I am going to write my wife—ex-wife-- and do anything I can to get her back."

"I'm sure that won't be hard," Harvey smiled.

"Wife, oh damn," Theo said. "Boy, the little woman..." He snatched up the phone and both Mahoney and Harvey retired to their separate bedrooms. In the morning Harvey found Theo awake and concerned. "She's not there," he said. "I've called once an hour all night long." Harvey did not know what to say to this.

At nine o'clock, Harvey and Captain Byron Mahoney attended a press conference, and made statements and wondered how they would be reported. The two men shook hands in public and then said private goodbyes as Mahoney took a taxi and Harvey and Theo started for home. In the meantime, they realized they had lost contact with Tib. He had disappeared. Only then did Harvey remember their remarkable journey, and what they saw, and what they learned...

"Shouldn't you be going home?" Harvey said, finally, finally, leaving the capital behind and starting back down 95, back to Bassingbury.

"I kind of think I don't have one anymore. Don't think I've had one in about two years." After a few moments, he opened up...he and Maribeth had been fully cooperating as a married couple...but their intimacy was gone. Somewhere, a wall had gone up—not a thick one, but a wall...

"I'm sorry—if this, if this, well, mess—?"

"Don't be. That kid and Mahoney needed help and I'm glad you let me give it. But I wonder if it was some kind of final straw for her."

“That doesn’t sound like Maribeth,” Harvey said. “Meaning, well, I don’t know Maribeth that well, but—she loved you, supported you. Still does I bet.”

“I’m beginning to think I’ve never known her. We used to talk. These last two years—she hasn’t noticed I’ve been—well, bored, tired—not with her, but my work—yeah, Harv, you called me out last year. I admit that what you did--threw my own legal career into high relief—safe, secure—boring as hell.”

“You haven’t talked with her about this?”

“I guess I didn’t want to scare her. She’s used to me being an attorney in a big law firm. and to tell her I’m sick of this and want to hang out—my shingle in a small town—like Bassingbury.”

“Really? I mean, you’d move there?”

“Looked pretty good to me when we visited you last March.”

“The kids okay? What about Pamela?”

“She’s gonna be fine. Got her war time job back at the iron foundry north of town—secretary to the boss who really depended on her, and she’s happy and not even looking for a husband yet though I kind of think this boss might be the real guy for her, and he seems to like her son. The boy is marrying a great girl in the fall and he’s already got a shingle out in Providence.”

At one in the morning, the headlights of Harvey’s car shone against the white wooden garage doors, and to his delight, the front door flung open and golden light and his pregnant wife fanned out on the flagstone walk. “Oh, my darling, congratulations,” Melva said, throwing her arms around his shoulders. “Thanks, and you’re beautiful,” he said. “But I have a guest—”

“So do I—Theo!” she cried as her husband’s friend came around the car. “Well, your wife has been worried sick about you—”

“Do you know where she is?”

“She’s here—”

Theo dashed by them both...and several moments later when Harvey and Melva came into the house, they observed Theo and Maribeth, both ruffled and tired. They were more tense than happy, but they were talking—shaking their heads—finally breaking into some laughter. “Tell you in the morning,” Melva said to her husband. “My hero.”

“Tell me a little now?” Harvey asked, closing the door on a bedroom that seemed as wide as the world, as intimate as the kiss Melva gave him before telling... a little. “When Maribeth could not find out why Theo had left—and then didn’t hear from him and couldn’t find him...she came

here. Turns out she admired me—well, us. Admired us for leaving things, breaking things off. She didn't want to go to any of her other friends—maybe embarrassed—anyway, we or I or both of us cleared away a great deal of brush. Enough of that—we know what happened in Washington from news reports, but what else happened?"

"That I will tell you, later," Harvey said...and slid into sleep after he stripped off, showered, and in a fresh pair of pajama bottoms...

In the morning, about nine, Harvey pulled on his robe to follow voices out to the back porch, radiant with sun and fragrant with coffee and happy with friends. The moment he saw Harvey, Theo said, "Hi pal, and I'm a complete idiot."

"Never said you weren't," Harvey joshed. "Well, what is this kaffee klatsch about? You told the women about our adventures?"

"Yes indeed."

"I'm glad I didn't know what was going on—I would have been doubly scared," Maribeth said.

Harvey accepted a cup of coffee and said, "You did tell Maribeth what you were doing—going? Something?"

"Yeah, I called home and left a message with our housekeeper, but the windows were open and the wind blew the note off the table!—the housekeeper found it after Maribeth called her this morning."

"I'm sorry," Harvey began and she interrupted him. "No sorrows. In a chain reaction, a lot of things were finally blown open—"

"Or a wall fell," Theo said. "Turns out we've been hiding a lot for fear of hurting each other."

Harvey sipped on his coffee. This was good conversation, even if a bit strong for first thing in the morning. His friends chatted while he and Melva listened, and learned about how even happily married couples can nearly flounder on the rocks.

"I always thought she loved giving those damned dinner parties and being the good wife to a busy lawyer," he said.

"I always thought he loved being a lawyer for Pottle and Johnson and the good life it brought us," she said. "Turns out he was scared I would be scared if he went out on his own, and I worried about him succeeding so I was the perfect wife for him...."

"...and she does not have one worry about me resigning from Pottle and Johnson and selling that enormous house and moving...here."

"I might even go back to hairdressing," Maribeth said. She grinned at Melva. "That's where this man of mine found me, after calling for his sister at the salon I worked at. Bassingbury has only one salon, right? I could get relicensed and open one. One that would be open to Negro women both a clients and hairdressers. My cleaning woman told me that white hairdressers, if they are willing to work with our hair, don't know how to handle it." The women soon went into the kitchen to prepare some breakfast, and Harvey and Theo were left alone. "Some stuff, huh?" Theo said. His eyes were pink with exhaustion, but he was giddy, happy, excited.

"Don't mean to dim your dream, but packing up and moving here may not be that easy," Harvey said.

"It won't be. And don't think I am moving in as your partner, I know you have a lot to do at the college. But I want to do this." He had dug his pipe out, filled and lighted it and grew steadier. "That kid, that Buckhouse. I know I said he got us to Washington. He kept driving when he figured we were being followed, cool as that cucumber; I never would have made it. I came near to crapping in my pants. When I asked him about it later, he told me something I never realized about being a Negro. Oh, I know a lot of them had to work hard—tow that barge, lift that bale—and figured they were angry—but never realized how they lived in fear all the time. He told me that when he was at home, if they ever heard a car coming round—they left the house and hid in the woods until they were the car had passed on—without somebody coming in and killing them—maybe for being uppity such as getting a phone line in and him, Jonathon, wanting to go to college. Taught him how to be—graceful under pressure. God, Harvey, nobody in this country—anywhere—should live like that." Harvey, for the first time in a while, had found his own pipe, and filled it and smoked as he listened. "I figure here in Bassingbury there may be some lawsuits as more Negro students arrive."

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Breakfast had created a mound of dishes, and Harvey felt guilty when he walked into the kitchen and found Melva swabbing them down. He first stood a moment, watching her, how the sun glowed in her hair, her enormous figure, and her singing to the radio on the shelf next to the broom closet.

"Let me do that," he said. Theo and Maribeth had gone to their bedroom to clean up and pack for departure, but they had other things to do in their bedroom first, he suspected.

"Be my guest," she said, rubbing her back and sitting down. Harvey plunged in and something occurred to him. "You said you had something great to tell me."

“And how...” The baby moved and she gently rubbed her tight skin. “Nothing in writing, but Ursula called me shortly after you left to tell me that—that the Board of Regents are studying plans to start a college of nursing here at Bassingbury.”

“A college--?”

“Exactly—there’s a growing need for nurses to study at universities, with a nationally standardized program of study, rather than at hospital programs or private nursing schools where sometimes all they are taught are how to give backrubs and sharpen needles. Anyway--midwifery might be a field of study in this college—Harvey, sweetie, people want to talk with me about my studies, training and experiences. I would be considered a consultant about setting up a midwifery program. They want interviews; program reviews, success rates, method and practical results!”

“Oh, sweetheart, I’m so happy for you!” Harvey said. He kneeled down on the floor to take her hands in his wet ones. “That’s great!”

“Isn’t it? Oh Harvey, things work out after all, don’t they?”

The music stopped on the radio, and an announcer said, “We interrupt our current program to report on news from Korea. This morning, North Korean troops without warning or declaration crossed the 38th parallel...President Truman has declared that he is not worried, but the United Nations has called for an assembly...”

“Oh, shit,” murmured Melva. Harvey remained glued to the radio for the rest of the day...and stayed close to news reports for the next four days while the crisis thickened, and finally on July 27, was listening as President Truman announced to the nation and the world that America would intervene in the Korean conflict in order to prevent the conquest of an independent nation by communism. Double shit, Harvey thought. He was not in the Reserves and would not be called up...and as he prepared for bed, his thoughts finally had to go back to the conversation in the facility near Harrisburg...about bodies “not human” and talk about invaders, invasion...and small triangles.

Good God, he thought that night, flipping his pillow, warm from the humid night and his worries. The floor fan stirred over their bodies, and Melva murmured as she moved, trying to find a comfortable position. Harvey and Melva had become members of St. Barnabas Episcopal and during recent prayers, he had prayed for Byron Mahoney and for Jonathon Buckhouse to be brave. He now had to pray for Sandy and Joe...and for young men headed for Korea.

Harvey came to that morning and saw Melva, with a white face, coming out of the bathroom. “My water broke, my dear. Let’s hurry.”

For the next eight hours, until a wrinkled, red face little bundle of humanity was shown to Harvey through the nursery windows of Bassingbury General, and Harvey was assured that Melva was fine and resting comfortably, thoughts of Korea, worries for Joe and Sandy, scared memories of an alien body being dissected...went away.

July 5, 1950: The first U.S. Marines - leading the U.N. force – joined in battle shortly after landing on the Korean Peninsula. U.S. troops suffered heavy casualties and the four American divisions were driven back into a perimeter around the southern port city of Pusan...

Joe: No Certitude, Nor Peace: Tashkent, June 25

For Joe Gallagher, the outbreak of the Korean War did not take him by particular surprise—when he finally learned of its advent, several weeks after its advent, he was in Derbend, a port on the Caspian Sea.

His father, an old hand in Formosa had spoken of the borders of Korea, China and the USSR being a string of firecrackers...and finally a spark set them off. Max viewed both leaders of the North and South Korea as sheep of overruling powers rather than the shepherd; he saw the USSR and the United States massing behind them; and the Chinese, after years of civil war, and Japanese invasion, and led by Mao Zedong, who saw himself as the first true and pure Communist...and the tinderbox went up.

Neither was Joe taken by surprise at his desire to go vaulting into the mess—and then his revulsion at a war, another war, after the world had almost ripped itself apart. Communism, capitalism, any ideology; why couldn't people be left to make up their own minds, why was money and power so needed by people...which simplified the movement of people, the decision made, the idiocy exploding.

As for him, he was out of it. One less Gallagher to deal with, that probably made a lot of Pentagoners happy. His mission was an official one and twofold: first, recruiting in various small cities in the west. Second, to fly to Tashkent.

Information to follow.

Getting to the Socialist Republic of Uzbekistan, involved no less than four planes, not one of them flown by Joe Gallagher. Over the years he had developed the hang of being a passenger... but it had not been easy. Even after a sleepless two days of hiding from the Nazis after he, Captain Gargas, Sandy, a dying general and a terrified master sergeant had bellied in somewhere in the Ukraine. After being rescued, and then flown home, the tired Joe still could not keep away from the yoke; he ended up flying their rescue plane for a few hours. As his transportation to Tashkent flew on, two propellers grinding away, he told himself he could be up in the cockpit getting a stiff neck, sore shoulders, and frankly being bored, while he could sit

in the back and catch up on his reading....But he had trouble concentrating on the words of his book as his heart and lungs worked in unison with the propellers; dealt with the air pockets, felt the headwinds, and worried about the fuel. He was vastly relieved to deplane from the final aircraft, some Russian thing that should have quit flying about ten years ago. He reached Tashkent on June 27 1950.

Behind Joe were four months that felt like a patchwork quilt. Recruiting duty, from Kalamazoo to Butte to Tacoma to Castro Valley. Not bad work really; it was good seeing young unscarred faces, though Joe worried about scars being suffered by the boys and even some girls, who professed interest, signed forms, talked with him eagerly, their eyes roaming the ribbons on his chest.

At a small outpost on the Canadian-US Border (where Joe was recruiting in the nearby town of Carson), he learned more about the radar posts that the USAF and Canadian RAF cooperated in establishing and maintaining to detect Soviet aircraft crossing the Arctic and to strike from the north, the "Dewline." At this outpost, J.A. Gallagher received unexpected orders to report to Muroc Air Force Base for training on jet flying.

Jet training? Joe already had some experience with jet fighters at Wright Air Force Base as he had conducted, for NATO, an inspection and inventorying of the German-built aircraft that had been ferried there since 1942, including prizes from Operation LUSTY. Joe requested a chance to fly in the jets—as a passenger—and was given a ride and some brusque instruction in the Bell jet, the P-59. Fortunately he had a pilot who provided a sober demonstration—but he did, at Joe's request, conduct a vertical climb; Joe's pilot heart and mind knew it would stall and it did—the guy regained control of the deck after plummeting...for what seemed a long....time...engines wide open and smoking.

"Enough for you?" asked the pilot when Joe steadily climbed out of his landed plane.

"Thank you," Joe had answered, and walked steadily away—wanting to throw up and wanting to throw up his garrison cap in the air—what a ride!!—but he was nearing forty, where these jet jockeys were in their early to mid-twenties, and scrappy as hell, ready to wax the tails of their best buddies, and he even sensed they wanted some place to start burning up in a war. He had dinner with the base's most sensational pilot, Major Chuck Yeager, a decorated pilot of the war, who had been shot down and escaped through Spain to fly again. He liked Chuck and his colleague Bud Anderson, two good looking guys with incredible records—and a wife and child each—but he could tell that ring the firebell, and they would be off. He had long switched off that track. He hoped.

In mid-May, Joe arrived at Lancaster California, and then driven the 55 miles into the enormous Muroc base, site of flight testing of astounding craft, and with an equally astounding death rate as pilot and crew tackled

experimental craft, including the flying wing back in 1943. The place was noisy, Joe thought, the kind of noise that still thrilled him, dammit. He was swiftly processed in, showed housing. He was not met by the base's commander; rather his lieutenant; probably acknowledging that Joe was in mild disgrace. Joe was fine with this; he was going to get some jet training, though he was not sure why, and Muroc was not known for training. Muroc was known for other things...it had, Joe learned by the deepest of scuttlebutt, UFO connections. In July 1946, two spherical or disc-like UFOs joined by a third object were observed. A flight crew and land-bound technicians saw white-aluminum aircrafts with distinct oval outline descending, moving against wind, and in the afternoon then saw a thin "metallic" UFO which climbed, dove, oscillated over field, also seen by a test pilot in vicinity. An F-51 pilot watched a flat object "of light-reflecting nature" pass above his plane. No known aircraft were in the area...so it was said. The official report: these were man-made experimental objects.

Muroc also had...the X-1—the first aircraft to break the sound barrier, which was for real—there were other stories such as an atomic powered aircraft and Air Force plans to send pilots into space, but these depended upon the success of the X-1. Joe had the pleasure of talking about this with Yeager at Wright Patterson.

Yeager described how he didn't take off in the X-1; the craft was taken up by a B-29 mother ship to 25,000 feet and then dropped like a bomb—and he dead stuck it to a landing in the dry lakebed which Hap Arnold had identified in the late thirties as a perfect testing site.

For three intense, exhilarating, exhausting days Joe was given training on ground and in the air, and successfully piloted, though with an instructor on board. He wondered why he was given the opportunity, but didn't question it. He had a stray thought that maybe because he was headed into sure death, somebody was giving him a kind of lollipop...or perhaps hoping he would crack up and thus be rid of another one of the Gallaghers.

He then returned to recruiting duty, visiting Medford Oregon, Boise Idaho, and Elko Nevada. And then orders, waiting for him at his hotel in San Francisco. He sent a postcard to his wife, who was now taking care of their son—saying, in a prearranged code, "Fishing fine, and would love you to be here for the salmon"—which meant he was continuing his swim upstream... Frankie, dear Frankie...and now what? Would his marriage survive his absence? Could he, would he ever find Pres? Standing at the window of the St. Francis Hotel, Joe watched the scurrying of the people below and wondered if any one of them faced the issues, the problems, the fear, the worries he was facing....and yet he was excited for his recently revealed destination....Tashkent. He would be traveling as a civilian, but under orders. From his TDY boss, Lt. General David Creighton.

Joe meditatively lighted a cigarette, giving a stray thought as to stuffing his pockets or luggage with cigarettes, both for himself and for barter as American cigarettes were still highly prized...and thought about how, back in the autumn of 1945, he and Komansky, under TDY for Creighton, had walked off from the ruins of a monastery and to a plane, and then to Mont Ste. Marie to receive a xxx clue about an unknown traveler, an American soldier, who had been

cared for at the monastery and then sent down the trail again. The clue, or item was xxx, and he had tagged to the chain about his neck, and then received new orders to continue on to Ober-Stettin, where he met Pres again....and Heidi, who brought news of a henge found in the Black Forest. Maybe it was that discovery, made through a mission directed by Creighton, that Creighton, sleuth of counter-intelligence, apparently took the henges under her purview, or perhaps was assigned to the job.

Or, Joe mused, deep in the kind of thought that a swirling dose of nicotine could produce, was...Dave Creighton himself on TDY under somebody else? Joe, in conversation with colleagues about the UFO craziness, was told, somewhat sotto voce, that the Central Intelligence Agency was conducting investigations...Creighton would be a natural partner in such a partnership. Joe's cigarette cough interrupted his musing. He stubbed his cigarette.

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Joe could not deny that he was excited about being in Tashkent...USSR. During the war, he had flown to Russia in a shuttle mission, and once again to bomb Reinigerwerkes...and then was forced down right where the Russian and German lines were messily colliding in a German retreat. But both had been in the "west" of the Russias. Tashkent is the Uzbekistan region was far further east. Once an independent state, Uzbekistan had become part of Russia in 1863. Joe had long understood that the USSR, formerly known as "all the Russias," embraced lands from the Arctic Circle to this region of Central Asia but he was still stunned at how different the lands were...and Tashkent's Russian history, which had started in 1893, had been preceded by overlapping eras, empires, and objectives: a thriving city on the great Silk Road; a portion of the Persian empire that was conquered by Alexander the Great; and then conquered by the Arab Muslims. Ghenghis Khan had violently thundered through in the thirteenth century, and was followed by Tamerlane in another, and by the early nineteenth century the area had been annexed to the rather charming-sounding province of the Khanate of Kokandin. The citizens were of many different ethnicities, the city population enormous by forced migrations; the language a medley of tongues, the city itself a picturesque if startling panoply of Victorian buildings with "Oriental touches" from the last stages of the tsars, and huddles of buildings that could have been created five hundred years ago, and under constant repair. There had been recent building in Tashkent, notably drab and uninteresting Soviet structures.

Lugging a nondescript suitcase, he headed to his appointed destination: the Alexander Nevsky cathedral. Now only an architectural monument to the Russian Orthodox Church, the church's broad multitudinous steps were lively with people enjoying the cooler temperatures of evening, and its mixture of people made Joe easily fit in as he sat down, his suitcase on his right side, and waited...and watched a tea and water seller dispensing green tea and coiled pastries to buyers. "And you sir?" he then asked Joe—in accented English.

Feeling a little foolish—and scared—Joe uttered the passwords in English: “Where is the statue of Tamerlane?” The answer: “Congratulations on your marriage.” Joe knew the context: traditionally, newlywed couples visited his statue to have the mighty conqueror bless their union. The seller then gave him a cup of green tea and a piece of pastry, which he crumbled to find the paper within. Feeling less foolish, and more adventuresome, Joe slowly tore the pastry in two, and while eating, read directions...which told him to “Follow the seller.” Calmly picking up his suitcase, and standing up, Joe moved off leisurely—as did the seller, who had paused to empty his cask of tea into a cup for himself and drink it.

Looking about as though he were a tourist, Joe followed the seller down a broad straight Soviet street, and then down into a winding alley formed by both brick shelters and adobe huts. Children clustered at the doors, and sometimes their mothers peered out to see the stranger...Joe merely smiled and walked on...his heart breaking for Ceile and Frankie...what were they doing? Was Frankie making friends? Did he know how much Joe loved and missed him...

“In here,” whispered a voice, and Joe turned into a doorway. “Zisalm Karomizov,” he told Joe.

Joe started to whisper his name and then cleared his throat and said it aloud. Next: “What now? I am taking directions from you.”

Zisalm, whose dark ethnic looks were balanced by Nordic blue eyes, nodded and sat down on a pile of rugs on the floor, gesturing for Joe to do the same. He then took out a Soviet side arm—but to lay it aside, on the floor. “You follow me and do as I say.”

Joe told himself quit being a general...you’re a grunt. “Yes. All right.”

He left, with Joe once more following, until they came to a café. They sat at separate tables and Joe pointed at pictures on the menu to order. Hungry, he bit into the native dishes with gusto, even though mutton was not his favorite and then drank several cups of green tea. They returned in similar fashion. He slept on a pile of rugs that night.

The next morning they shouldered on haversacks and took off into the chill morning air, and walked to the train station. Zisalm paid for the cheapest seats, wooden benches on a rattling car of the Tsarist period. They rode into what Joe judged to be north, moving through a vast green but basin. Zisalm spoke with the fare-takers who seemed to dislike their jobs as much the customers disliked them for doing their job. Lunch was bought from a vendor who tipped out cups of green tea and handed them chunks of bread stuffed with vegetables and a few shreds of mystery meat, possibly camel. Finally, in the middle of the afternoon, Joe ventured a question: “When do we arrive?”

“When I say so.”

Joe folded his arms and closed his eyes as if he didn't care that he was under Zisalm's direction. But he did. He hated this. He felt like this once before...when the 918th had been taken over by Creighton and his boys, and Joe could not tell his men, his crews, that they might be flying with dangerous cartridges—and if he said so, he would be “racked”— fortunately, the affair ended when the Nazi agent was ratted out and killed, and how Joe enjoyed killing him—right between the shoulder blades as T/Sgt. Hansen fled across the fields. He also wanted to kill Creighton...

Quit being a prick with your memories, Joe told himself. And that he was under Creighton's direction as well. He finally dozed off in the evening, and came awake at a lurching, quivering stop, sometime in the middle of surprisingly chilly night, and at a rough shake of his shoulder, he was up, walking carefully, eyes alert...and mouth dry with sudden excitement.

The train pulled away and left them on the wooden platform, fastened to a wooden building. They walked in to find an elderly man hunched in a sheepskin cape. Zisalm offered money and he motioned to the wooden benches built along the walls. “Here's the hotel,” Zisalm grunted. “No bath, but the toilet's outside.”

“Thanks,” Joe grunted...and he hastened outside and hastened back. Zisalm was already sleeping, and in a minute he was too.

He awoke to hear Zisalm offering prayers. Respectfully, he did not say anything, then or in the five times a day that his guide offered prayers, facing east. He would prove faithful in this.

The breakfast menu: goat milk, goat cheese, and bread, bought from the nearest dwelling. After eating and cleaning up as they might, “How about telling me where we are or is that a secret?”

“Karakalpakstan.” He motioned Joe to the door and pointed out over acres of field, grooved for planting. “See that smudge of blue? That's the Aral Sea. One of the largest freshwater lakes in the world.” This was the most words he had said in a row, and Joe detected an English accent.

“I see. And what does that have to do with us?”

“We're heading there.”

Joe once more fought back a feeling of futility as someone else was in charge. Zisalm left him alone while he arranged for their transportation. He battled against lighting cigarette after cigarette to pass the time, mainly because he only had two packs and he had no idea where and when he could buy more. Good time to stop, he thought again, his heart aching for home. He finally lighted one just as a pair of boots sounded on the platform and the door opened. The station manager and their visitor talked—about Joe, who watched, politely, trying to get the defiance out of his face. The visitor walked forward, smelling of fields and mud, and his voice

clearly asked Joe for his papers, his documents. Joe slowly unpacked them from his bag and handed them over...and his heart pounded and he bit the inside of his cheek... Zisalm came back. Perhaps from long practice he came in slowly, evincing no surprise at who seemed to be the local sheriff.

“Where’s our ride?” Joe practically grunted.

“Outside.”

Joe found two stout horses, with shaggy fur, rough manes, and colorful bridles. Their owners were holding onto them, and accepted the money Zisalm produced. Well, he hadn’t played cowboy in years, Joe thought, and gingerly got on his mount’s saddle, reflecting such tough little sons of guns perhaps carried the Tatar hordes into Eastern Europe...

For three hours they rode toward the blue smudge which grew into a slightly larger smudge. As the sun warmed the earth, and picked up the smell of the grassy vegetation, Zisalm relaxed a bit. Joe moved in immediately, calling to his back, “What are you showing me?”

He actually flashed a smile over his shoulder. “You will see.”

Joe began to enjoy the adventure. As he rode along, clouds passed overhead, their shapes dry and thin, and evaporating as the winds dragged them to the west...They camped that night, using their horses for warmth. They had traveled all the next day, dismounting to walk the tough horses, to stop and make tea, and for Zisalm to say prayers. Joe drank some tea and found himself admiring the man’s faith...in what and to do what? to live well, to survive, to die with people who loved him? Joe threw away the dregs of the tea, and they mounted and rode.

There was a different fragrance in the air when they camped for the evening. “That’s the sea you smell,” said Zisalm. “We’ll arrive by noon tomorrow.” He then accepted a cigarette Joe offered him and smiled. “Thanks. You’re a good man in the saddle, sir. We are told Americans are as weak as overused tea leaves.”

“What did you tell our inquisitor two days ago?”

“I told him you had come to check on the Aral Sea.”

“About what?”

“The sea is changing. Big agricultural projects started during the war raised the food needed, but they also began lowering the sea’s level for irrigation and it’s continuing. People who live downwind the lake are getting sick and there might be a connection. That is what I hear.”

“That’s too bad.”

“For our needs, it’s good. A henge has been found.”

Joe did not react to this information although any mention of the word...well, unhinged him, in some way...and brought up memories of the sickened, poisoned, dying, foul...site of that henge that Yellich had helped destroy. Tib, Sandy and Heidi reported on the dead animals and the sickly foul lake there in the Black Forest.

They lay down rather companionably side by side and gazed up at the night sky. As always, Joe wondered where his loved ones were as they too dwelled under the same stars... He woke to his horse clambering to its hooves and snorting. They ate, saddled up and rode, and the sea grew larger and larger...and finally, they neared shore. It was breathtakingly blue. The winds dragged waves across its surface. The sun was setting and they took care of their horses and set up camp, kindling a fire with goat dung Zisalm carried with him. Despite his worries, Joe felt that he was back in the woods with Pres and Jeff...and with Max at times...but the smell of their fire had been better, with the flames biting into crisp, sappy pine boughs.

In the morning they saddled up and rode for some ten miles along the southern shore of the lake; Joe kept glancing around for a structure, and wondered how the hell nobody had noticed a thing like a henge standing in the dry, spacious landscape. Or how it might have damaged, hurt...sickened. They rode up on a ledge overlooking the lake...and Zisalm pointed...down.

Joe peered into the bright rippling sea...and saw a pile of what looked like columns ghostly and gray in the water. Zisalm’s taciturnity had reduced Joe’s own words, and rather than blurting the obvious, Joe said, “How long has this henge been known about?”

“They were first observed, to my knowledge, about three years ago when the sea’s level began dropping. A Soviet—something or other—made a report about the things that by various means came into the hands...well you have surely met them, the two gentlemen?”

“Villda and Dryatkin?”

“Are those their names? Well, live and learn.” Despite everything, Joe again heard an Oxbridge affectation in the man’s accented English. “The official report was about location. Dimensions. Theories—a lost tribe, etc. Probably nothing stated that could be squared with Marxist theory.” Zisalm threw his leg over his saddle horn, lighted a cigarette. “We came out here to find out more. There are certain Tajik people who have led a nomadic existence here, for centuries.”

“Where can we find them?”

“They’ll find us.” They made camp on the ledge. In the afternoon, when the light was at its best, Joe took numerous photographs with his tiny camera and then stowed it deeply in his haversack.

Rather than hauling out the dung, Zisalm rode out and came back in three hours, dragging a load of tree boughs. In the dusk, he built a roaring fire, a beacon. They became rather companionable that night as Joe asked him how he had come to be with the two gentlemen: “Hired or abducted...?”

“A little of both. Actually...in London I was doing my dissertation based on old documents that I had stolen from the Nevsky Cathedral—about certain events and monuments found in Central Asia. Shortly after I defended, I found two strange men knocking me up.” The description matched Joe’s own memory of the two men.

“Did you do this because you wished to...or because they forced you?”

“Both,” he admitted. “As a student in Moscow, I published against Soviet efforts to wipe out ethnic languages. I just escaped with my life. I was told that now that the war was over, Soviet agents finding me in London and killing me would be far easier than finding me out here.”

“Do you report to them?”

“Yes. After we finish I will mail them a report. They make check with you for confirmation.”

The next morning Zisalm squinted into the flat steppes to the east, crusted with green growth from recent rains, and said, “We have company.” For two hours, they observed a moving cloud of dust that finally thinned to reveal mules mounted with riders.

“Here comes the sheriff of these here parts,” Zisalm then announced in the tones of a cowboy.

“Where’d you learn that fragment of the King’s English?”

“From perfectly dreadful cowboy cinemas they showed at the local theatre on Saturday afternoon.”

“How did you know they were dreadful?” Joe asked, amused.

“Because I cheered along with the boys—and the girls—when the singing cowboy defeated the local banker and courted the motherless rancher’s daughter with his songs. But, seriously...” He related to Joe that the approaching cloud of dust was nomadic group of Tajiks. Their leader, a man in his eighties, had politely declined Soviet “suggestions” that these unprogressive people settle into cities, or take up farming, lose their language and history...while he and his followers herded goats and horses from pasture to pasture. Soon, the leader had said, the Soviets would have their way...they would defy them until they could no longer.

Zisalm tutored Joe on Tajik cultural manners and mores as the group approached and the first thing Joe did was stay quiet and wait while Zisalm came forward to a man who dismounted his mule. They hugged and kissed each other on tanned cheeks, and Zisalm gestured politely to Joe.

Handsome tents were erected, the stock fed and watered, and invitation to enter extended. The Tajik men were dressed in baggy pants and embroidered vests, and their heads were wrapped with colorful scarves. Joe nervously assembled his learning; these were Islamic peoples which had been to a degree Sovietized (with a great deal of resentment) and were rather secular. They kissed in greeting, but would excuse Joe, a Westerner, from such a greeting, which was part of their legendary hospitality. Joe should say, "Asseloum," and be patient. Acknowledge a woman he might encounter with a nod, but the sexes kept fairly separate. Joe should taste everything offered in way of food and drink. Use your right hand ONLY. Joe then had to wait for the subject of their interest to be addressed by his hosts.

Joe, following Zisalm, entered into the large tent, vented for air circulation. He removed his shoes and accepted water to wash his hands, and then was seated at the low table. He then viewed his host, introduced to him as Benahm. The man was old, but strikingly handsome, with a silver-grained beard and piercing eyes. Joe was aware that Tajiks were not Arabs, as most people assumed a Muslim to be, but rather Indo-European, with deep roots in Persia. Zisalm then said, "Say your name. Slowly and clearly."

"Joseph—Anson—Gallagher."

First, tea was offered, and then meat dumplings and kebobs of mutton were served by women. Joe was tense but found the food delicious, and his hosts were forgiving of his gaffes which included getting his left hand into the affair—once. They ended with a round of eye-watering vodka. As the dishes were removed, Zisalm gestured Joe forward to sit next to the host, who said to Joe, "I welcome you," and then pointed to Zisalm. He was ready with questions he and Joe had agreed upon in the afternoon...

Zisalm spoke slowly and cautiously. He began by asking about the health of the group and their families; the success of their endeavors, and questions about their immediate future. Then, with a direct but subtle change of voice, he questioned Benahm about what they could see in the lake. Benahm shrugged and thought; he answered questions; shook his head, and then began speaking—Zisalm held up his fingers—one, two, three—four and five—and then his other hand indicated six and seven and eight. The look on his face revealed surprise. More conversation...and Joe, despite everything growing sleepy, suddenly came alert when Benahm pointed to him and said, "Gall-gher?" Joe began to sweat...even here, he thought to himself, he had enemies; and next, don't be an idiot.

Finally, Zisalm politely nodded, and ended the conversation. He told Joe how to say goodbye, which for their visitor, included a handshake. Joe dug up the word for “Thank you,” and they backed out of the tent’s opening and into the cold night air. “I have much to tell you,” Zisalm said as they headed for their simple camp. “And he has some questions for you in the morning.”

“No doubt,” Joe said.

They built up the fire and talked over nips of vodka, poured from Zisalm’s flask. Of course, the topic was clear: what did Benahm say about the “things” in the Aral Sea and how long they had been there? “You saw me holding up fingers?”

“Yes—eight years?”

“Eight centuries.”

Later on, Joe wondered why he was surprised. Eight centuries...yet, it made sense. A degree of sense. The Nazis, God knew, were capable of strange and remarkable acts and accomplishments, but building a henge at the Aral Sea seemed damned unlikely. And, here was the proof he had asked for, and his bosses—which is how he called them—wanted as well.

Joe asked...what else did he say? They sat up until after midnight as Zisalm reported and Joe wrote in the firelight. Eight hundred years ago or so, there was a group of “strangers” living on the shore of the Aral Sea. Unlike the nomadic groups that drifted with the seasons, they stayed where they were. They farmed a bit, but did not hunt what game there was. They were called “the strange ones” by the nomads. If they had a name to call themselves, they did not let on. Their name came from those who met them and talked with them on the shores of the Aral Sea. They were polite, but offered no hospitality. They lived simply. But they did have a temple. But nobody knew the god they worshipped.

“I could see how the henge could be seen as a temple. Did our host say how it was destroyed, or pitched into the lake?”

“The people who used it vanished rather suddenly—after they dismantled the henge and toppled its pieces into the sea. It seemed that...people who looked like them came soon after, and they did not seem, well, friendly—to the Tajiks or to their own, whom they missed. And they too left.”

Joe recorded what he could, knowing he was hearing of events nearly eight hundred years in the past, and it only raised more questions...which had to wait. They slept and woke up to find their host waiting for them. Zisalm scrambled up; for Benahm to visit them was considered an honor. Joe built up the fire to heat the hobbled tea kettle. Zisalm and Benahm talked quietly, and Joe knew he was the subject of the conversation.

Politely, he waited...and then asked, perhaps rudely, "Sir, do you know what those things in the lake are made of? Stone?"

Zisalm translated his question, listened to the man's willing answer, and translated for Joe. "He says it is some kind of metal. He has a piece...and would be honored if you accept as a gift."

"I would be honored," Joe whispered. The man, saying words to the effect that taking a chunk off the henges was something all young men did to prove themselves—no, he was not sure of what—and that he was an old man, did not need it; his sons had their own chunks and two of his grandsons would have their own soon. He fished the chunk of a pocket concealed by a colorful belt and gave it to Joe. "Thank you, I do appreciate this," Joe said so sincerely no translation was needed. He then spoke again.

"Your name," Zisalm then said. "He says he believes he knows it. Are you...associated with a treasure of gold?"

"Dear God," Joe uttered. "That damned—story about THAT gold got this far?"

"Tell me more," Zisalm said, also intrigued. He translated Joe's story for their host, whose forehead soon lowered over his eyes, and whose gnarled right hand was set over his mouth. He nodded when Joe told its history – "A half a bag of out of circulation gold coins, buried, that was all. I buried it, and could never return to dig it back up. It's in Yugoslavia in some obscure hill. Sir, that is all it is."

That clearly surprised Benahm, but after a moment, he nodded, wisely. Joe apologetically now pressed his host for details...Benahm requested Zisalm bring one of the men of the camp. A handsome young man, who looked as though he belonged on horseback racing over the high dry plateaus of Central Asia, came promptly. There was more talk, and then the two men, with gestures of thanks and bids of farewell, left. "We'd better get going too," Zisalm said. Joe asked, "What did you learn?"

"The story the young man told said that Gulgar—of the ari, the gold—is fairly recent. He also said that 'Gulgar' was now in the Caucasus mountains."

"What?" Joe could only ask, incredibly puzzled. "Where'd he get that story?"

Zisalm talked more with the young man, who himself seemed a bit unsure of the tale. Zisalm finally translated of how there was a recent story of two men, walking to freedom in the Caucasus. "He admitted," said Zisalm, "that he's not sure how the treasure story got mixed up into this latest story, about the two men. But the stories come back from the trading links say that the two men, called 'Gulgar' have finally reached the Caucasus mountains."

After some time, Joe spoke, loudly and definitely. "I'm going there. To the Caucasus."

Zisalm waited for some time before he said, "What would our bosses say?"

Joe spoke a bit violently. "Shit on them. But...I was given a free hand to conduct my investigations."

After another while.... "I will help you," Zisalm said.

"This is my affair. My mistake back in 1945, and my correction. Dammit, this vulgar ari has killed people. It can't kill anymore people."

"Well, my orders were to 'extend all help.' This qualifies."

"All right." They shook hands and Joe, unfortunately, could not help but wonder if he were seeking the treasure himself. Joe thought suddenly about Sandy, quick tempered, pigheaded at times, but completely loyal; he would not create one moment of worry. He missed him. Sometimes he thought of how they had known longer than he had known his wife. They had parted and had not been sure of each other, but never in bitterness. He sometimes wished that they were still together, in the Lily, taking war over Europe—it had all been so simple to understand...

The chunk of henge went into his saddlebags.

That night, after bedding down, with acute worry over the henge receding, his worry quickly went to those he loved...what might happen to them by doing this—or if he failed to return? But he had to do this; the feeling came up in him, the feeling he had when...he stood up to Pres there in Magadar, and ordered the fuel be given to him, and his planes. Even though Pres had collapsed at this...even if he hadn't come around to Joe's decision, Joe would have taken that gas anyway... it was brutal, but it had to be done. Joe rolled over on his side and thought, equally brutally, that it had all turned out all right. Gallagher luck of the Irish. Luck might run out. But it might hold, too. He rolled on his back to look at the sky. "God," he thought, if you are there, as incomprehensible as you seem to be...help me, and help those I love...help everybody."

A falling star streaked softly across the sky. Joe smiled, knowing he was just seeing some fragment from millions, millions of light years...yet it seemed a good omen.

Getting to Turkey from the Aral Sea was in part easy, in part hard. Escorted by Benahm's able nephew, who offered his services in the morning, they set out from the southern shore of the Aral Sea and started to the east, to Aqtau, on the Caspian Sea. It was no easy journey despite rolling lands, abundant fodder, and clear days; autumn was following them, and God knew what else was following them, or was waiting to confront them.

Sandy and Margaret: Swept with Confused Alarms – Corpus Christi

How to describe the coming of Gordon: Pearl Harbor, D-Day, Anzio, Battle of the Bulge...and though they were braced for him, as well as knowing that bracing was only a stop-gap, he came into their lives like a fiend out of hell, and bringing hell with him.

It began, not surprisingly, at the civilian airport at Corpus Christi.

Gordon was the last off the plane, practically dragged out and then in by the stewardess and the pilot, and then bolted through the doors, yelling it was hot, and he wanted a cold drink...

Sandy and Margaret physically stopped him, and for that Sandy got a few kicks in the ankle as he wrestled Gordon to a chair, practically sitting on the kid...who promptly told them both he hated their shit, and hardly blinked when Sandy grabbed his face and then, in his deadliest voice, said don't you ever say another four letter word in our presence again.

Somehow they got home, using a taxi, and Gordon was interested enough in the new surrounding to be civil, and actually dozed off...and became awake and stinking the moment they got him into their small base home, which they had been lucky to get. He sneered at it—"where do you take a shit? Outside?"—and backed down only slightly when Sandy warned him again... He whined throughout dinner, wanting a hot dog, not this—stuff—Margaret was serving, and thankfully, fell asleep when he was ordered to bed—in their bedroom which had direct access to the bathroom. They decided they would rather sleep on the floor in the small living room, using a saucepan for a chamberpot—to make sure he didn't sneak out, though Sandy doubted it. He too had wanted to leave the boys home upon arrival, but knew he could not deal with the world.

"This is the worse Chaplain Freds promised us," Margaret said, as they lay on the cool floor, seeking the wind of the ceiling fan. "The worse is when I leave you alone with him," Sandy said. "Well, he's my kin," she admitted, and so dreaded the next day she hardly slept. Sandy did, but he was reminded of trying to get sleep when he had to get up at three, on the line by five, and take off the hell over Europe. And that's the way the following ten days went, with Gordon never giving up and giving in and Sandy and Margaret holding the line against his abuse, his whining, his foul mouth, his lack of cooperation, to put it mildly. His imagination was filthy, his mouth worse; he refused to bathe; every question brought the opposite answer; he screamed once for nearly an hour, and Sandy and Margaret kept reminding themselves this was not the kid's fault... but it happened, that Margaret, driven to desperation, finally slapped him—and he violently grabbed her hand and bit it. Hard.

Sandy equally violently slapped him across the room, picked him up by the collar of his shirt, slung him on the couch, towered over him, and addressed him in a voice and blue eyes that had

turned into cold coiled knives and for once, Gordon fell utterly silent: “I could kill you for that. Now get the hell into your room and don’t you stir, even to breathe. We’re going to leave you and when I return I may have the masters at arms on you—that’s Navy talk for the cops.”

They left him saying words to the effect of “F*** the cops.” But even as he said this, Sandy caught a new sight: the look of utter terror on the boy’s face.

Sandy locked the front door and thought again, for probably the hundredth time, “What the hell—would Gallagher do?”

They hurried to the clinic at the Mainside service complex. They signed in, and Sandy called Charles Labourie and his wife, who had transferred there as well, to come to their house and keep an eye on “that goddamned little bastard.” Margaret was calm, but her hand was swelling. “Sandy, what are we going to do,” she said when they sat in a tiny room and waited for the corpsman to come. “I knew it would be bad, but how bad—“

A knock on the door produced a youthful looking face—with a big smile. “Lt. Komansky, I can’t believe it, sir—“

“It happened,” Sandy said, gesturing to his wife.

“Of course, of course, sir, well, Mam, let’s tend to this. What happened—what?—wow,” he said, examining the bite mark. “Did you bite him back?” he asked after Margaret told him the story. He gently cleaned the wound. He grinned slightly when Sandy remarked, “He’s a wild kid that we are trying to take care of until September.”

“So wild he’s carnivorous,” Margaret joked, wincing at the swabbing of alcohol and the bandaging. “I hope I tasted terrible.” The hospital corpsman then consulted with a doctor, and after a while, he returned with a syringe of penicillin. “This is just taking all the precautions,” the corpsman assured her. “Mam, would you like a sedative?” Margaret nodded.

“And a chair and a whip,” Sandy murmured. Margaret then needed a lady’s room and Sandy stayed behind to speak with a corpsman—for some reassurance. He felt at his wit’s end, and needed another ear.

The corpsman listened, his face split with a great big smile, though his voice was sympathetic. “Sounds like you got another guy like me on your hands, though at least I never bit anybody.”

“Huh?” Sandy said.

“But I did stow away so I could prove myself without crying or bawling over Hagensburg—“

“Corbett?” Sandy demanded. “Uh, Steve—Corbett?” Suddenly, the blond hair, the boyish face, the smile...sent him back to March 1943 when he encountered a kid, a true kid, who helplessly revealed how terribly young he was, while showing up some of Sandy’s worst faults. “Look Corbett,” Sandy said, looking at his watch, “I’ve got to report on the flight line in an hour, I’m in training, with this war they’re upping everything, and I at—my wit’s end—”

“I can see why, Sarge, uh, sir, but can we meet sometime soon?”

“Sure, sure—there’s a snack hut down on the runway that lets the hoi and the polloi do some mingling, and sure, I’d love to talk with you—God, I’d love to. Check out schedules tomorrow and meet me out there if you can.”

There were hurried farewells, and Sandy had to let Margaret return on her own, and he felt he was sending her into a tornado. “Don’t worry about me,” Margaret said. “Pray for me, but don’t worry. Besides, the LaBouries are there.”

“Sure,” Sandy said, and when he got home at about eleven in the evening, he found some peace, or at least quiet. Turns out that even Gordon was shocked about actually biting Margaret...though he would not admit it for a long time. His silence was welcomed and then worrisome, and finally the LaBouries, who stayed for a late dinner of scrambled eggs, toast and the inevitable Jello, volunteered to check on the kid. He was sleeping, his mouth open. Margaret left a peanut butter sandwich for him. In the morning, Margaret had to deal with a wet bed and a foul blanket, but Gordon was quiet. “So’s a volcano before it goes up,” she thought.

The next day Sandy was glad to see Corpsman Corbett waiting for him in the small shade of the clapboard lineshack that served coffee, ice cream when available, and ice old Coca Cola. It was another few minutes away from the house, where the demon child lived, their responsibility, which they had accepted—and which came up when he and Corbett sat down with cold bottles of soda at the twin picnic tables. But first, to each other’s questions, they canvassed the last seven years—seven!—and Sandy learned that Corbett had gone back to his aunt and uncle; returned to high school and became an outstanding athlete and a straight-A student, but “forty five days after I turned eighteen, and with my diploma won and tucked away I joined the Navy.” “So, the Navy?” they asked each other. Corbett said, “I figure that after what I did to the Army I’d better give them a break and join the Navy—what’s your story Lieutenant?”

“Direct procurement—engineering students with flying experience were ‘invited’ into the Navy to train as pilots. Seemed like a good opportunity.”

“Man, you looked good up there!”

“Pretty good, I guess--uh, look Steve, I’m sorry for letting you down back in England, back in the war. Joe Gallagher gave me the responsibility of taking care of you and I couldn’t bear to be a baby sitter. If I gone to the hospital and got you into a private room, you wouldn’t have run off to that pub and then climbed on board the next day—but you saved our bacon, that’s for sure.”

“Let me apologize for that. I just wanted my own way and I got it and you know, I still didn’t feel much remorse—until I read the colonel’s letter. He told me that on a precise mission like that, an extra hundred pounds might have fouled things up for the mission, maybe for everybody—that really got me thinking, for the first time, with my brain, not my ass.”

“You got the letter then,” Sandy said.

“I got it at the Red Cross in London where I was bunking. Gave me some pretty straight shit too—about how I could have loused up the mission, but also that he was promoting me and nominating me for a Silver Star, and it would be on my record. He also said that he knew he was preaching, but I was damned lucky to get a taste of war like that and then be able to go home. But he also told me that I would be told that I was not to talk about my experiences—bad for the Army’s reputation, and fodder for some senators and even the Nazis.”

“Did...uh, he also tell you not even to tell friends about what you had done?”

“He warned me that I’d more likely get guff for it rather than admiration.”

“I told him to include that. I’ve wondered if you took it.”

“I did, and the older I get the better the advice becomes. How did you know?”

“The one time I excelled at anything was when I ran track in high school and at a meet actually won first place. Got a medal about the size of a quarter but it was big to me. At the boys home I lived at, I showed it off to the guys, and the last time I saw it I was being forced to watch it being flushed down the toilet.”

“Sorry,” Steve said, carefully because he could see that although Sandy delivered his story without pathos, its memory still hurt.

“Unless you got a big heart, you deny good things happening to other people—so, tell me, how’d Old One Thousand become a hospital corpsman?”

“One, I actually liked biology in high school. Two, I guess I’d rather save lives than take them.” He sat back, his eyes going down and to the side. “That plane I shot down—the pilot got shot right out with it. That was a corpse falling. That was the war to me. And now we got another one. But...what about this kid you two got on your hands?—or should I say this cannibal?”

Sandy told as much as he could and smiled when Steve said, "How about turning him over your knee and spank him until he blisters?"

"I might not be able to stop. Now you made me mad but I detest that kid. But, you know, I want to help that little bastard too. He's had a lousy life so far. God knows how he's gonna turn out if somebody doesn't take control of him."

"Are you scared of him?"

"No. But I can't get in control of him. He takes anything and twists it. He'd deny it but everything is our fault, whether not giving him hot dogs for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and he could probably figure it out that Margaret deserved being bitten. By the way, it's already healing nicely. You oughta be a doctor."

"Matter of fact, I'm planning on going to college and then maybe medical school," Steve said. "I sure wish I had a prescription for Gordy. But I might be able to try—I help coach the Little League here at Corpus. We have practice tomorrow morning and I'll come by and get him."

"He might hit you with a baseball bat."

"I'd hit him back. Not really, but I got less at stake with him than you. It could give you about two hours of peace."

"With the wife," he grinned. "Okay, but you may be taking your life into your hands."

"I stand warned."

The next day Corpsman Corbett cautiously knocked on the door of the Komansky's quarters, and to his surprise, a quiet kid came out. He was the color, Steve recalled later, of a boiled onion, and about as limp. "Ready to go?" he asked.

"Sure," the kid whispered.

"You're Gordon, right? What's your last name?"

"McMichael," he whispered.

Sandy was surprised—at himself. He never knew what the kid's last name was. It hadn't mattered...but it did.

"Call you Gordy? If you don't like it, you don't have to be called that."

"Gordy's fine," he said.

Margaret and Sandy followed them out and waved goodbye. Steve led “Gordy” away to the baseball field next to the base’s elementary school and when he glanced back, saw them still standing there, watching—Steve kind of figured they would have escaped into the house for understandable purposes but it told him they were really concerned about him and the devil’s child.

Gordy trudged beside him, veteran of a battle he had lost.

Sandy and Margaret did indeed retreat inside, but simply to lie down together, emotionally exhausted—from the last three weeks, and from the last oh, about twenty minutes. Sandy later told Steve that about twenty minutes before Steve picked him up, Gordy had said his usual litany of no, defiance, lies and four letter words. Sandy grabbed a kitchen chair, hooked it under him, sat down and said to Gordon, “Sit down, and now.” When Gordy merely careened around the room, arms akimbo, pretending to fly, his buzzing sound seeming like a raspberry, Sandy got up, cornered him in two strides, locked his arms around and carried him shrieking to another kitchen chair upon which Sandy thrust him. He put his foot on Gordy’s right knee. “I’ll sit on you if you move.”

Gordon sat but his eyes were screwed up tight and his lips thrust out. But he could not quite ignore the deadly ring of Sandy’s voice. “All right Gordon, I’m gonna make a deal with you, and you’re smart, you’ll take it. Here it is: I’m gonna ask you things and if you deny them—like you deny or defy everything—then you win. Deal?”

Gordon paused in his “nah nah nah” to think about it and nod with a shrug.

“Here it is. Your life stinks. Come on, tell me it doesn’t. If you say no, you’d better mean it.”

Silence. His face turned into a fist. His arms folded over his narrow chest and he commenced with his chant of nah, nah, nah to Sandy’s relentless voice. “Your mother didn’t give a rat’s ass about you. Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me Gordon, tell me your mother loved you. *MINE* did. But *yours* didn’t.”

“She did—”

“Mean what you say, and sing it out.”

“*SHE DID!*”

“*NO SHE DIDN’T AND MINE DID!*”

“...She stunk. And you know it.”

“Yeah, she...did,” Sandy said, delicately, but not gently. After a moment, “You lose, and I win. And because you lose, you’re going to listen to me. Right?” He gently gathered the neck of Gordon’s striped t-shirt in his fist. He yanked him forward, slightly.

“Right.”

“Your life stinks, even now. You make our lives stink and we haven’t done a thing to deserve it. You want to make everybody’s life stink. Stop it. I mean now. You stop it by being nice. And then we all win. It’s pretty easy. Right?” When Gordon was silent, nailing his eyes on the floor, Sandy said, “This is the guy from Jim’s Mule Farm talking—to another ass. Who’s got his head stuck all the way up.”

“Right,” Gordy whispered after a long two minutes...

“Okay. Your first way of being nice is when we hear a knock on the door, there’s gonna be an old friend of mine who’s going to take you to baseball practice. And you’re going to go, without a complaint—“

“But I—“

“What?”

“I don’t know how to play baseball.”

“Well, then you have a chance to learn.” This came from Margaret who had steadily washed breakfast dishes, over and over while this had been going on.

“Get on your feet and I will show you a few things,” Sandy almost blurted. He pulled the boy off the chair and started showing how to hold a bat, how to hold the glove, which Steve had thoughtfully brought over. While trying, Gordon slowly went from sniffing, to tears, to sobs, and then all out howls. They let him lie crumpled on the floor, until there came the knock on the door.

To their surprise, Gordy sat up, slapped the tears from his face and stood up. He greeted Steve with a “hello,” and then “kay,” when Steve told the boy to come with him.

He and Margaret stood at the door. “D-Day was easier.”

“Ho-ney, you were magnificent. I think he finally cracked,” Margaret whispered.

“Even a crack would be something,” her husband said. “The Grand Canyon got started by a crack. But it ain’t over.” Margaret was experienced enough to nod.

Gordon, now Gordy, obediently played baseball—and when Sandy visited the diamond a few days later, he saw, to his delight, Gordy make a pretty good hit—and make it to first base. He then waved when Sandy shouted, “Good one!”—and his waving seemed a joyful thing.

But still he whined, sulked, demanded...until Sandy turned his eyes on him, and when this began to pall, Margaret moved in, a mixture of honey and arrowheads. One night they awoke to sobbing, at least Sandy did. Margaret was exhausted and he was too, but on edge as carrier qualifications went forward, and Korea heated up...and he gently shook Margaret. “Gordy’s crying,” he said.

“Well, maybe this is basic training for babies,” she said. “At least if you feed or change ‘em they quiet down.” They got up, knocked and came in to find Gordy curled up on the floor, emitting violent sobs. They were too wary and tired to let their pity come up. Margaret finally said, “Gordy, we heard you crying. Let’s talk.”

“She hated me,” the boy gasped. “I tried to make her love me and she hated me.”

“No, I just don’t think she cared about you,” Margaret said. She wanted to stroke the boy’s unruly hair, but did not dare. “I don’t know too much about how you grew up but your mother wasn’t good to you. She didn’t care for anybody but herself. Gordy...she was stinking to me, too. And I didn’t know why.”

There was a knock at the door, and when Sandy opened it, Corpsman Corbett stood there, still in uniform. “Saw your lights on,” he said, and his face made it clear that he knew and experienced how much Gordy could be a royal pain in the ass. “Hey, Gordy, what’s up, huh?”

Rather than saying something smart, or a four letter word or words, Gordy turned his face away and lay there. But he was quivering. “Come on, Gordy, you did okay yesterday. You’re learning about baseball; you don’t get it right the first time off the bat...”

“They think I’m stupid,” Gordy said.

“Because you struck out? We all do it!”

“I don’t know how to ride a bicycle,” he suddenly said and then sobbed again. “They put me up on the seat and shoved me off and then I hit a car when they ran off.”

Sandy resolutely kept his heart from pouring out to the boy. Not yet. The three hovering adults exchanged glances...and then smiled a bit. A crying Gordy was better than any other kind of Gordy. “We can find a bicycle some place. It’s kind of scary at first, but pretty soon you’ll be riding a bike like you were born on it.”

He lay still for a while. “Thanks,” he finally murmured and fell sound asleep.

A little shook up, they went into the kitchen and had some coffee; Sandy was due on the flightline in two hours. "No baseball, no bikes, but a lousy mother," Margaret said, pouring the coffee out. "But at least he's talking."

"No more turning you into hamburger?" Steve said.

"Not at the moment. You've really helped us."

"Can't be much longer," he admitted. "I just received for orders for Yokohama, the naval hospital in Japan. I've asked for air sea rescue, as a medic. Ride on the helicopters."

Sandy suddenly put his coffee cup down.

Steve told Margaret he could get his hands on a bike, not a new one but okay...and that he knew that Gordy couldn't read like a third grader should be able to read. "I've got an idea...tell him when he learns how to read he can as many comics as he can get his hands on."

Margaret was about to say "Comic books, good heavens, no!" But she recalled how a Wonder Woman comic had helped her, and she said, "You know a lot about kids."

"Used to be one, and pretty little hot shit too. Pardon me. You know, Sarge, one thing you might tell that kid...nature's gonna take care of a few things, it's called growing up. Even I did it. Though it got off to a bad start." He paused and then said, "My mother, after she was widowed—well, she got married again a year later, and then sent me to my aunt and uncle. I never forgave her for it, even after she told me that this guy she married made her do it. He wanted just her and any kids they would have. I told Gordy that story too...and he said to me that his step-dad—the second guy with the weird name--?"

"Boblice," he said, pronouncing it as "Vavlitz."

"The guy threatened to kill him. That may be just a story, but I gotta feeling the kid was telling the truth."

"Did Gordy say why the guy made such threats?"

"No."

"Sarge" and Margaret took Steve and his girlfriend, possibly fiancée, out to dinner before his transfer, and once again, thanked him for helping with Gordy—and was delighted when Steve said he would drop the boy some postcards. "He'd be thrilled even if he wouldn't admit it," Margaret said.

When they returned home, and routinely checked on the sleeping Gordy, Sandy told his wife what Corbett had told him. "Again, I didn't have no bed of roses at the home, and threats

abounded—I didn't have an adult—at home, close to me—threaten to kill me. God, I said those words to him, too.”

Margaret murmured something and then blindly took care of something, fighting off the memory of her unloading a bullet into the man's head. And then him escaping.

And this reminded her of something and when she called Gordy into the kitchen to talk with him after Sandy left, he did. Gordy was still acting like a limp noodle; all the ugly starch was gone. His quiet behavior was a relief, but even Sandy knew he needed to come out his funk. Though carefully. Though a warm morning, she fixed him hot chocolate, which he mumbled thanks for and sipped on it—awkwardly, with the cup on the table and lips slurping. Table manners, table manners next... “Gordy...I need to thank you for something. You may not realize it, but I think you may have saved my life...”

He looked up from his hot chocolate. “How?” he finally asked.

“When you walked in on us, after the wedding...your stepfather and me...well, I think he might have killed me.”

“Why?—I mean, why did he want to kill you--?”

“Certain people are working on that...but if you hadn't stopped him when you did...I owe you my life.”

He stared at her, head erect, his brown eyes pleased and a smile lurked up...and then collapsed. “It wasn't like the Lone Ranger would have done it.”

She thought about that. “It's very perceptive of you...yes, the Lone Ranger usually comes to people's rescue with clear intent...you did not, but Gordy...I still owe you my life.”

He looked so feckless, she nearly smoothed his longish hair back, but did not. Instead, she asked “Would you know why your stepfather would want to kill me?”

He shook his head. “I know why he killed my mother. He hated her.”

She had no answer to that. She then said, “Don't speak with Sandy about this. He has a lot of worries right now.”

“Yes mam.”

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Sandy continued to train, and train and train. The pilots were learning sobering truths about the war in Korea: the Air Force and Navy bombers were getting their tails waxed by Soviet MiGs, to

the point that a new strategy was being called for... He figured he would be sent out on fighters, as his record was, he knew without particular pride, an excellent one. He was steady, sure, he didn't want to hot dog and do calisthenics in the air...but he also knew that he didn't want to kill anybody else. That was the last war. In a lumbering bomber, blasting away from his turret, or down below, with the bombs that he saw and felt let go. It would happen again. And then there was Margaret who had so far proved strong chinned as he prepared for a war they didn't know was coming when they exchanged vows in January. And now...unbelievably, there was Gordy. He could not yet think of the kid without his stomach tightening, but there had been some progress made, and yep, Gordy reminded him of himself, the anger on top, the longing down below...the longing for somebody not to only love him, but be proud of him.

It came time for the naval aviators to put in their requests. They were alerted: the duty they requested would decide their future in the Navy. Charles LaBourie, despite proving himself at the controls of jets, and acing carrier qualifications...requested bombers. He was a married man, and a father, and so would take up duty on lumbering four-engine PB4Y-2, akin to the AAF's B-24 Liberator.

Sandy also made a request-- not for fighters. Instead, he requested helicopter training. Helicopters had already made advances in rescue both on sea and on land. And after studying their engineering, Sandy became utterly fascinated.

5 August 1951. Battle hardens on Pusan Perimeter. UN forces, pushed back by the advancing KPA, have been forced taken their stand in the "Pusan Perimeter," a 140-mile (230 km) defensive line around an area on the southeastern tip that includes the port of [Busan](#). The UN troops, consisting mostly of forces from the [Republic of Korea Army](#) (ROK), [United States](#) and [United Kingdom](#) are mounting their defense at this perimeter, fighting off repeated KPA attacks.

Ceile: Neither in Joy nor Love – San Antonio

The commencement of hostilities in Korea fell on Ceile's shoulders like...the cross on Christ's shoulders on his journey to Calvary.

Ceile was surprised at this thought; the last time she had looked at the stations of the cross was when she was sixteen; her doubts then turned to disbelief. The onset of war or whatever it was that was breaking out in Korea, a divided country, was being called a flare up, police action, a Communist crusade, hostilities, and just plain war. A lot of people didn't even know where Korea was, and when they understood it had been under Japanese occupation during the war, it aroused some sympathy; but the issues were tangled and miserable...as were her heart and soul.

On July 1, when Truman announced that the US ground troops were being sent to Korea, Ceile listened on the radio in her office, where she was reviewing the selection of flight nurse candidates for the new class. She listened, wondered, tightened her anus muscles...and finished her work. She was due at the base theatre at six to pick up Frankie, who was enjoying the parade of cinema that he had rarely seen in England. He insisted he didn't mind going to the movies alone; but Ceile knew he had taken some flak for his English accent and his peaches and cream complexion that didn't quite square with his last name of Savage—which he said before correcting it to "Gallagher." As always, she had to draw him out; did he like the movie? Who was in it? They then walked to their utilitarian little home. She cooked dinner, they listened to the radio after they did the dishes and Frankie asked, "Where's Korea?" Rather than playing the usual game of dominoes that he enjoyed Ceile found the volume of encyclopedias bought at a second hand bookstore in San Antonio, and they searched for the country. The accompanying picture showed it to be a kind of peninsula extending and separating the Yellow Sea from the Sea of Japan. Its borders: the USSR, and China... "Is Daddy Joe there?" Frankie asked, timidly.

"No," Ceile said, carefully. His timidity was not merely annoying, it was worrisome. "He's still recruiting..." Recruiting for young men to die, she thought, grimly. But a postcard from Joe, with a coded message, indicated he had stepped off the radar into other tasks...and was that better?

Where the hell was he? As always, her face remained a smooth mask of work, attention to duty...being a soldier, and a nurse, an administrator, and a teacher.

And still an irate woman, as Joe's suspected paramour, First Lt. Julie Lovelace Markos efficiently took care of their mounds of paperwork. They worked together well, but paid not a jot of personal attention to the other...until one day when Lt. Markos put in a request for a three day leave. She and her husband were going camping, she said, to Ceile's honestly envious question. "He's being transferred to Japan," she said. "We need some time together, quickly."

"For babies?" Ceile snapped, without meaning to.

“Yes mam,” Markos said, politely, but with some snot.

“Well, have a good time with your husband,” Ceile said, not wanting to inflect the word “your”—but doing it anyway.

By July 2 she sensed a quickened pace at San Antonio, as war birds might be flying again... Two days...three days...a week...and the news, which Ceile was sensing was being doled out with care...was full of confusion. The UN fielding its first armed force; bombing strikes, naval carriers leaving the Philippines and other ports of call; then McArthur’s announcements from Japan. On July 6, in conversation with her dad, she learned that research and development at the Orion plant was already rising. And everybody wondered if another enormous B-29 would deliver a dreadful payload...on a place called Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea. By 1950, the USSR’s own massive armament, made this possible course of action terrifying, not soothing.

She also learned from less than public sources that the first Task Force had been nearly defeated...3000 men killed or captured; a case of green troops meeting trained and ready troops...by July 10 there was a possibility that the UN forces would be forced from Korea. On August 4, the UN troops had taken a desperate stand in the Pusan Perimeter which included the port of Busan. Soon, some more heartening news arrived: air strikes were rolling the Koreans back, and fresh troops were being brought in via the port. Years later, after records were finally released, US and British air power, zooming off carrier decks had deterred Stalin from taking a more active role in the war...though Soviet MiGs, flown by scrappy North Korean pilots gave a lot of lie to it all.

Of course, of course...the Air Force Flight Nurse was going to war. Their roles had not been established yet, as those in charge scrambled to understand the issues, the jobs, the objectives, the methods. The current class, which had just finished bivouac training, was going to curtail training as much as was dared. Ceile had to be a commander, a counselor, a nurse; at home she was a mother to a nervous young boy, and a wife...back at home, working for the cause, but stuck, without even information about where her husband was. Ironically, if Joe were in the current hotspot...at least she would know where he was...!

Frankie stayed quiet and cooperative during these stressful days, behavior he had learned at his first home, when he was both seeking attention and avoiding it. To please Ceile, he even went out for baseball, which he was not good at, but tried anyway. He picked flowers here and there to give to Ceile; he brushed his teeth without being told, but finally, was found crying by Ceile in the middle of the night. His sobs threaded into her uneasy dreams of standing on some tarmac, waiting for a plane full of wounded to land... “You’re going away,” he told her when she turned on the light and sat down on the bed. “I know it, you’re going away.”

Sitting on the bed beside him, and holding his shoulders, she whispered that yes, she was needed overseas... "I called Irene and Max this morning. And you know, my parents, are asking that you live with them if you wish!—they have another grandson—my brother and his wife live nearby—either set of grandparents will be happy to have you with them. Oh, sweetie, I know you want to be with us, but Daddy Joe and I are both soldiers—like your dad was, too." He leaned against her and sighed.

The next day she called her parents, to tell them what she intended to do. There was already a need for evacuations of personnel from Busan to Japan. "Ceile," said her mother in a tone she had never heard. "You can't go."

"Yes, I can, I have to—"

"You have a son now, young lady!"

Ceile quailed at the tone and her being identified as a 'young lady'... "Yes, and he will be cared for by you and Dad, or by Max and Irene—I have to—"

"Quit saying that. You really have to stay here, face another kind of music, and take care of that dear little boy. He needs you more than ever, with Joe gone."

Her father's voice came on. "If I had any kind of power to ground you, I would--"

"GET OFF MY BACK!" she screamed at them...and for the first time in her life, hung up on her parents. A moment later, she called back, and the hand that held the receiver was shaking. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

"Baby, go ahead and cry...but please, please, stay in Texas. Your mother and I went through death a dozen times a day worrying about you during the war...we can't stand it again."

"I'll think about it."

Two days later, she learned that Julie Markos was resigning. Ceile felt a moment's wild elation—which did not show on her face—and soon the paperwork was on her desk. She worked around it for a few days. Finally, a polite knock on the door; her adjutant announced "Lt. Markos asks to see you Mam"—and Ceile had to say, "Send her in."

The two women stood, saluted, and surveyed each other. "Mam," said the lieutenant, "begging your pardon, but can you take care of my request for resignation?"

"Your husband is in Korea," she said. "Or flying sorties over it."

"Yes Mam. And I have his baby in me."

“Ah.”

“Mam?” Lt. Markos asked after a moment. “Mam, obviously you didn’t read my application. I would think...you’d be glad to get rid of me.”

“Yes, and no. You’ve been an excellent admin, Lieutenant. And yes...you’ve been an emotional thorn in my side. It will be a relief.”

“I understand. Mam...I know...I told you about your husband and myself—when we were both more than angry. But I want to insist...that your husband was a perfect gentleman all through that night...and you know what surprised me? When I was nervous he seemed rather surprised—he assumed that I assumed--there would be no monkey business.”

“That’s enough,” Ceile began and was brought up short by the lieutenant.

“It won’t be enough until you forgive me, him...and yourself.”

“For what?”

“For being a bitch...about him.”

“Yes,” she lied. Her next words were less a lie. “I hope you have...well, the best of wishes to you and your husband.”

“Thank you, mam,” she said. They saluted. In the next half hour, Ceile took care of the paper work and sent it on, with relief, and with sorrow...that one more woman was pregnant, and she was not.

She felt a violent pain in her soul.

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“This is about Joe, isn’t it?” This was her brother talking to her, at two in the morning, when she was groggy with a sleeping pill and brandy and trying to talk softly as Frankie was not a good sleeper.

“Yes...no...dammit, men are dying over there and I could help...”

“The nurses you’re training are being prepared to help. I appreciate your wanting to go over there---not everyone runs into a burning building for good reason, but you’ve done your work, you know you have! You’re no longer a kid—“

“I wasn’t a kid when I flew in 1943—“

“Which means you’re seven, eight years older now!—with scars and an adopted son to boot—don’t think those scars will protect you anymore...” Her brother then did something neither parent did. He cried. After a moment, they spoke again, with Ceile hanging onto her own tears. “Okay, you old firehorse. But remember, some firehorses died in harness,” he said. “Love you, twin. For God’s sake, come back in one piece.”

Finally...Irene got hold of her. She didn’t storm or plead. After perfunctory greetings, Irene said to her... “You’re searching for Joe, aren’t you?”

“Not physically. And he’s not in Korea. I don’t know where he is, but he is not there.”

“If you’re not searching for him physically, then your souls are searching for each other.”

Silence acknowledged Irene’s eloquence. Ceile then spoke, briskly. “But I can’t just stay here...even with Frankie. Thank you for taking him. He knows you two better than my parents, and that counts right now. And he knows the school.”

“What about your parents?”

“He knows you two better but any chance you can give him for a visit—“

“I’ll invite your parents to Dusky Boughs, when he comes here.”

“Yes, thanks....”

They talked, with Ceile identifying the date she would bring Frankie to Washington. They said their goodbyes, quietly hung up, and both refused to cry. Too much to do.

Ceile readied her office; wrote letters; dictated reports; she drank too much coffee laced with brandy...and ridiculously, longingly—waited for a tall strawberry haired young man, in a khaki, and bandages, to appear at the end of the hall, interrupt her while preparing dinner, come to her in a mirror...telling her that Joe was all right. If that had been Jeff, back on 5 June 1944... He didn’t come. Perhaps he too disapproved of her leavetaking. Good grief, she was really going crazy. Throughout it all...the one person who seemed to understand was Frankie. He was disappointed that she was going, yet she could sense in his eyes an understanding of how people had to go, had to do what they had to do...for good purposes and for bad.

Oh, what was she doing? Why? How many people was she hurting? Oh, and where and where and where was Joe... Her feelings had not receded, if anything grew more brutally tangled as she and Frankie were driven up to Dusky Boughs, in late August. In two days she was flying to San Diego for embarkation to Hawaii and then to Japan, where evacuation flights were already in action.

Frankie had been there before, and his adoptive grandparents were glad to see him bound out of the car. Max and Irene engulfed the boy in hugs of welcome. The next few hours were sweet, and trying, as Ceile remained strong for her...son...and firm with her parents and in-laws who flew in from Long Island, reminding her of a wonderful five days of reunion, back in 1945. Finally Max, after taking Frankie for a swim in the natural pond formed by channeling the run, surprised his daughter-in-law in her room, who was ingesting a brandy, at record rate. "It doesn't help," he warned her.

"I agree. But it's something."

"You could still get out of this. It takes some muscle, but I've still got some left, even though I am retiring at the end of the year."

"No, Max. Thanks. I'm not retired. Yet."

The next day they drove Ceile to the train in Bassingbury, where she departed for Washington, dry-eyed and confident. Her parents and in-laws, flanking Frankie, waved and smiled as Ceile O'Briean Gallagher went to war, again, this time across the Pacific.

She refused to think of the sadness in Frankie's eyes. And the hardness in her own as they traded one last set of looks. And of him, crying.

...A Whole New War

Anson Wire Service. Two weeks after the amphibious invasion at Inchon, September 15-19, the capital of Seoul has been recaptured and returned to control of South Korea. The operation, led by General of the Army Douglas MacArthur involved 75,000 troops and 261 naval vessels in a daring assault on the forces of North Korea, at the largely undefended city of Inchon, on the eastern coast. The assault on Inchon was far away from the Pusan Perimeter that UN and ROK ground forces were desperately defending, and is credited not only for ending a string of victories for the Korean People's Army as well as severing or disrupting their supply lines...

New York Reporter, October 15. MacArthur predicts "home by Christmas". In a summit meeting on Wake Island, General of the Army Charles MacArthur predicted to President Truman that battle-hardened UN troops, which include British, American, Australian, and Korean, would soon be home. American troops could be home by Christmas, due to the success of the amphibious landing at Inchon, the liberation of Seoul, and the pulling back of the People's Army of Korea as supply lines continue to be disrupted, and the RAF, the USAF, and the US Navy air arm take superiority of the air...

Kansas City Clarion, October 26: "A Whole New War". Despite rosy predictions of ground troops being home by Christmas, the United Nation forces in Korea were dealt a serious blow when Chinese forces, the existence of which was detected but not accounted important, launched a major offensive...

Joe: Neither in Joy nor Love – Uzbekistan, summer

Joe felt tiny beneath the enormous sky and the encircling lands they traveled through. But feeling tiny was no bad thing, he reflected. Good for you. Puts the world back into perspective and makes you consider and reconsider things.

By the time they reached Aqtau, on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea, he and Zisalm were good friends, with moments of danger, fear, humor, and philosophy binding them together. The first fearful event came when they crossed into Kazakhstan at an invisible line. They were stopped, their papers checked; by now, Joe had grown a beard and wrapped himself up like a Tajik man, and learned enough words to respond to the border guards who rode up to them on thin horses. The regions they lived in were such a muddled medley of races and ethnic group they did not question Zisalm's blue eyes and Joe's ruddy beard. Philosophy joined their travels when, and in the evenings, when they were not exhausted, they talked of things... and religion came up. Unless it were completely impractical, Zisalm was faithful with his prayers, and when Joe inquired about his...beliefs in "his" deity, Zisalm was friendly and without a shred of dogma. "Belief in a higher power can't help but be questioned by the rational mind...yet, to keep a conversation open with the higher power...can't hurt. It keeps you aware of how small we are, how enormous the universe is...and how others depend upon us to do the correct thing, to help and protect each other." He grinned over a small cup of vodka, which Joe was learning to be friends with. "You know this too, I have no doubt."

"I once read that God did not create us. We created God. That we need a God to give us something to fear, or...aspire to."

"Or to help us know we are not alone. And what a common feeling that is. And, let us leave God, or Allah in his heaven, and get on with our work and hope he or whatever is giving us a hand."

Joe peered up into the quilt of stars that night and recalled how Abraham Lincoln had never spoken against religion, and faith...and was not a believer. Yet he, in the most terrible days of the Civil War had finally turned to God for solace, and for help...

Makes you know you're not invincible. Joe had flirted with outsized ego more than once, and both times events stomped on him, puncturing him like a balloon. Though prepared for West Point discipline, he had blithely entered the academy thinking himself ready for it, and no, nothing could prepare you for how the army boiled you to a mass of jelly...in order to shape you, make you understand that you were less of an individual than a member of a great force. He dealt with it, quickly, and made it. Climbing into those blue skies as a member of the Air Corps, he flew into a world of freedom that he relished; he was an eagle without a chain and how eagerly he had swallowed the story that B-17s could not be shot down. He found out that

there was some truth in this as his squadron returned intact the first mission, but he learned on his second mission that more truth lay in the eager young waist gunner who left an arm in the crawlway and then his life behind at the base hospital. His buddy, the belly gunner, was never the same. By then, Joe wasn't either. The Gallaghers were unbeatable...Max, his three sons, the Four Horsemen!—but one was taken away within weeks of Pearl Harbor. Joe faltered on his next mission, and the next... Joe's ego was soon reduced to what it should be...but he felt so small, helpless...for his family, for himself.

Traveling by horse was also good for the ego—and he learned to enjoy it. It was something to make only about twenty miles a day; rather than a friendly runway and a potential drink of brandy guiding him in over hundreds of miles as the crow flies. Joe learned to fasten on some distant point, like a tree, or a rise in the land, and toward that they would ride. And quiet...so very quiet. The wind moaning, sometimes whistling; clouds sailed like ships, like dragons, like the rippling manes of horses. From a distance, they might see a tendril of smoke. They would hear the scream of a hawk overhead. In the evening they made camp, and would sit around a small fire and talk under a sky that Joe described later as chowder-thick with stars. And he at times felt a kind of peace that he had to shove away. People, events—maybe, he thought in a flourish of drama, the future might depend on what he, what they were doing and doing successfully.

They arrived in Aqtau as their food gave out, and their tobacco long gone. The sturdy horses were sold and Zisalm, pockets ajingle, led them to public baths, where they cleaned themselves up and trimmed their beards. They bought new clothes and boots. They feted Benahm's nephew to dinner, who responded in giving some stories he heard about the "gulgar ari," which had drifted in with the early summer's caravan. They secured a map of the looming range of the Caucasus mountains, and he traced a route...to an obscure place where people lived, surely, guarding a treasure. That was just talk, he admitted. In Tajik, Zisalm kindly lectured the young man about chasing after false riches...and that they were seeking it out to prove the thing false. Benahm's nephew was wise enough to agree, and start for home.

Joe was silent, and glad to be so, as Zisalm argued with captains of the small boats that still used sails. He secured them passage and the next morning, they came on board and helped as they could with grain sacks...and settled down on the scrubbed deck. Their passage was almost directly across the Caspian Sea. The waters grew grim at one point and Joe found himself at the rail more than a few times. Zisalm was a bit surprised as his partner succumbed to seasickness, but Joe joked "We Gallaghers are strictly ground and air. Not a sailor in the bunch." Mentioning the sea got him to thinking about Sandy, and how he was doing training to be a naval aviator. That might involve flying from and to carriers. He couldn't imagine landing on the deck of a ship, with jet power under the ass, but he wanted to...

As the small ship sailed on, and the two men could do nothing but sit and try to relax, they inevitably started talking about the inevitable subject—who were these spooks whom they had joined with-?—or had made them join with them.

“I think they too were made to join, with someone,” Zisalm said. “Maybe out of gratefulness, maybe to stay alive. I don’t think who they work for saved them from the gallows or anything, but from illness, injuries—you get close to them you see how damaged they are. I don’t think they should be alive, according to typical measurements of life. I saw the blond one—the Russian suddenly collapse—right in the middle of a threat. The other—the tall one—gave him an injection and he recovered after a time. I saw this because I couldn’t be excused from their presence.”

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They arrived at the port of Derbend and disembarked and Joe was glad to have ground under his feet—a curious feeling for a pilot, he joked. Once more he was silent while Zisalm, stitching together words and hand gestures, bought mules, food, and wine.

They started out from Derbend and for nine days rode hard...but courteously through the Caucasus as they were relying on the hospitality of the mountain dwellers whose lodges guarded the routes they were taking. Zisalm approached those who came out of their lodges to greet them; he offered drink for their food, and cautiously questioned them about the map they followed. Some shook their heads; others looked sly and would not answer, but finally a widow answered them, bluntly: two days away, perhaps three, at a horseshoe-shaped declivity. Her man and her brothers died trying to find the treasure there.

Along the way of their trek—perhaps a purposeless one--Joe was stunned at the beauty, grateful he could see such wonders...and thought he never wanted to see another mountain in his life!—unless he could view it thousands feet below him. He also felt it would give his proverbial right arm to be with Ceile and Frankie; he saw their faces in the fire they kindled at night, and he re-tuned the winds in the pine boughs as their voices... Frankie was singing “Home on the Range,” the night before Joe left Washington...and he recalled hugging his sleepily warm little boy the morning he left... He also wondered about the Korean War, and where his father was. Max had spoken of retirement at the end of 1950, but with war commencing, Max would easily buckle on his armor and his sword...

One morning, nearly two weeks of punishing riding and walking, and he seemed far higher than his B-17 ever flew--Joe’s eyes, still sharp, suddenly observed a waft of smoke, and then a surge coming over a ridge within about an hour’s ride, he would estimate. They were curious as their hosts of two nights before did not speak of any villages or households beyond the “third ridge” as there was so forage and few animals. They nudged their mules forward and, as they often

did, dismounted to walk and lead their shaggy smelly mounts. They did so for two days as there was no trail and finally, nowhere else to go but up a sheer wall. For two days they tried to find a way up and out, and finally they did. But they left their mules behind to crawl up, and when they finally crested the top, Joe tried to say sincere prayers of thanks. Only God could have gotten him up that face...and left them gasping there on the ledge.

Their naked eyes picked out slight movement on a good-sized ledge across the chasm. Smoke on the wind pricked their nostrils. They rested a great deal; the altitude was destructive to quick movement and thinking, although Joe's lungs had long expanded to deal with the thinner oxygen.

Zisalm dug out the field glasses, peered into them for a long time, readjusting, and moving them up and down. "I see something...there, in a horseshoe-shaped declivity. But it's an encampment of people, not a treasure site."

Joe took the glasses, pressed them to his eyes under his red beard, adjusted the lenses, and peered again. "Dear God," he said. And he meant it. Suddenly, and completely. And lovingly.

Excerpt from *The Unwinnable War: October 15: on Wake Island in the Pacific, General MacArthur and President Truman met to discuss the future of the Korean Conflict.*

MacArthur reportedly told Truman that he was confident of early success in the North Korean offensive, and that he no longer feared Chinese intervention. Just 10 days later, the Chinese army, which had been secretly massing at the border, made its first attack on the allies. In the days that followed, the allies' headquarters received intelligence that Chinese forces were hidden in the North Korean mountains, but this was disregarded. The Chinese troops withdrew, and the allies interpreted these initial skirmishes as simply defensive. Undeterred, General MacArthur ordered a bold offensive on 24 November to push right up to the Yalu River, which marked the border between North Korea and north-east China. He optimistically hoped this would finish the war and allow the troops "home by Christmas". But it was instead to mark yet another turning point in the conflict. The next day, about 180,000 Chinese "volunteers" attacked.

A shocked MacArthur told Washington: "We face an entirely new war."

He ordered a long and humiliating retreat - performed in sub-zero temperatures - which took the troops below the 38th parallel by the end of December. It was called "the big bug-out."

The allies were forced to withdraw south of Seoul in January 1951. Here, in the relatively open terrain of South Korea, the UN troops were better able to defend themselves. After a few more months of fighting, the front eventually stabilized in the area of the 38th parallel.

Pres: Forfeited and Gone -The Trans-Caucasus

Excerpt from No Wind So Bitter. Anonymous. Published 1977 by Prius Press, London.

My good and stalwart friend John D. Hobart tripped on the edge of a slope of the Caucasus Mountains as we unknowingly neared the end of our nearly 3000 mile journey.

When he finally got to him, "Turn me over," he said. I eased him on his back.

"Come on, come on," I coaxed. "I can see the border of Turkey from here." Behind us, almost completely behind us, to the east, was Georgia, one of the Russias, and the home of Joseph Stalin who was the man commonly behind all the prisoners, political, religious, criminal, social, and otherwise that I had the privilege and the fear to meet, crowd in with, bunk with, eat with, fight with, and travel with for just over a year in Siberia.

Hobart was dying—now, as we overcame our last obstacle of the Caucasus. He was going the hard way, not through the easier passes that the Huns probably used when breaking onto the Anatolian plateau. Then, after all we had been through, he had tripped. Getting to him nearly killed me too. I don't write that to celebrate myself, but to celebrate him. I couldn't bear to leave him dying on a ledge where no human foot had ever been. He actually smiled when I encouraged him that he was going to be okay.

"Liar," he said. "Turkey is close but I bet you can't see it. But, Pres, It's over."

"Tell me a joke," I begged.

"Saint Peter...I'm gonna tell him to let me in immediately 'cause I've spent my time in hell..."

I had seen the look of death on the faces of my soldiers in my battalion. I had seen it on the face of a boy who had joined us, helped us, died for us. But I still tried. "Don't leave me alone out here."

"You've been alone a lot in your life. You'll be okay. But don't be a stranger, not to the people you love."

Within the half hour, after no real struggle against the inevitable, he died. He didn't have the beatific smile on his face, but there was a hint of that grin that he kept in his heart and soul, and kept him alive for nearly thirteen years in Siberia. What was he, an American like me, doing in Siberia?—for him, since 1938. That will come to be known.

I was too exhausted to climb up, so I slept with him that night, using his body as a wind break against the mountain gales. I didn't have any sentimental dreams about him finally returning to find his wife's and daughter's arms opening to him, as he often spoke about...but upon awaking

in the morning, I missed him like hell and I sure hoped the dream would come true for him, somehow. I had to keep going if not for me, then for him, who had first proposed escape and dug me out of my hole of despair which had me more frozen than the Siberian nights.

I could not dig a real hole for him, but I found a cleft in the chasm we were in. I placed his stiffened cold body there and covered him with stones. I then crawled up to the ledge he fell from, ate some food and kept going.

There were still many steps to take on this journey even though it was ending, after seven months of walking, walking, walking...occasionally running, once sailing, more than once crawling.

We, that is, Hobart and I, took our first step in escaping our Soviet imprisonment, specifically from the Camp 308-A, Irkutsk, Siberia. John Dreveille Hobart and Preston Maxwell Gallagher escaped on April 4, 1950 to begin a journey to Turkey, which I can measure, as accurately as possible, 2993 miles, at least where I stopped.

In way of explanation, I was in a Soviet prison after being captured in Eastern Europe. Suffice to say I was on duty for my country, and affairs went wrong. After being captured, I was driven to and placed in a Soviet prison made over from a Nazi death camp. I was given no chance of sending a message out. I was given a trial, which I did not know was a trial while it was going on. I received a sentence of 25 years, which still surprises me. Meaning, I could have been shot and disappeared. Instead, I was sent to prison and to work as a laborer in a Siberian coal mine. Perhaps they decided to use me first as a laborer. Work in the coal mines is ultimately fatal, but takes more time than a shooting, and had a generous offering of suffering, whether from overwork, disease, accident.

As it has been said, "the longest journey begins with but a single step."

What was the first single step? There are too many and for the sake of protecting some critical people in my ultimately successful journey I cannot go into full details and so must say that the first real step in our escape and journey was taken at the moment that our barracks fell silent on what I believe to be the first of April, of course, April Fools' Day. Of course, much preparation had gone on before Hobart and I took that first step into Siberia in an escape. In way of prelude, I will say that Hobart and I came together when he saved my life weeks earlier and then told me that I was the man he had been waiting for—to plan and execute an escape. He had been waiting a long time, being that this was his thirteenth year of imprisonment.

Next, a few words about some extraordinary circumstances. We were originally in Camp 304, one of many near the Siberian coal pits. It was brutal work in an equally brutal environment and

when Hobart and I talked about escape, I deemed it hopeful thinking that could not become a reality.

Yet, after six months, 200 men were suddenly selected from the camp's population. We had returned from our day's work, lined up—and then were picked. We were marched out following a baggage wagon pulled by four horses. Of course, we did not know why we had been selected; we could only figure it was to be executed. We then encamped by a river, and were given axes to cut down boughs of trees. We were told to strip and then handed greasy chunks of soap and told to scrub down. We slept naked that night by fires fed by the wood we had chopped. In the morning, new uniforms and shoes were distributed after our hair and beards were cut. What was going on? There was no point in asking.

Every day we marched until being told to stop. When we stopped, we were given the axes to chop wood for fire. Obviously, these axes were then accounted for. Then one morning, after ten days of marching, rather than being assembled to march after breakfast the axes were redistributed and we continued chopping wood. Some prisoners were given saws to fell large trees. Only then did we understand that our journey was ended and we were building a new prison—for ourselves. However, it was good working outside, rather than in the bowels of coal mines. We were cheerful as we chopped, hauled, split, hewed, lifted and chinked, creating a shelter before winter really made its onset. Our camp was finally formed of ten barracks and the usual buildings for the guards and prison commissar, and utility buildings like the kitchen and hospital. We dug a broad but shallow trench around the barracks and erected a wooden palisade, on top of which guards unrolled barbed wire. The guards also girded the trench's bottom with barbed wire. We finished in time for the first snow, in mid-October.

But putting it plainly: no stone walls. The guards were attentive, but that changed as the seasons advanced. During a sixteen hour winter night no guard could have lived standing on the two watchtowers; without electricity the only heating was an immediate fire hazard. So just about the whole camp slept, with only occasional patrols made by cursing guards.

Of course, where would an escapee go?—even in good weather? My partner and I once kept a time schedule of a vehicle, which drove away from our camp, and returned eight days later. Of course, that was no gauge for how far away we were from some kind of civilization, given the roads the vehicles traveled on. But in the ten days we had marched, more or less creating our own road, we had seen nothing but occasional smoke from a faraway fireplace. As fall ended and winter commenced, the uncharted territories beyond the palisade were engulfed in snow.

So, escaping this prison was going to be relatively easy—the really hard part came after the escape. Prison was hell, but hell featured food of a sort, a bunk, work, and expectations. Escape into Siberia was another kind of hell. When you escape out of one hell and into another hell,

planning, planning, and planning was the only way to get away and then to continue. And stay alive.

Our planning began immediately. It felt like a blast of cold wind on a hot humid day to think of a future beyond the next meal, a few hours sleep. We planned separately during the day and shared our ideas when in our bunks. The first step of our plan was to bunk nearby so that our conversations would not seem unusual. Of course, bunks were assigned, perhaps as a way to prove authority, but we prisoners were free to move if we wished. But that was not easy either, as every man regarded his bunk as his own space. We used persuasion, some tobacco, and general promises to move closer together and before we turned in—or passed out with exhaustion—we talked and smoked and planned.

I will say that at no one time did we argue. We disagreed, but when we disagreed, we talked about what we believed and why. Sometimes he was right, other times I was right. We both agreed that our best defense outside the gates was supply, which makes victory possible. You can have the best soldiers in the world, but without ammunition, tools, and food, then the best soldiers can't complete the work. When I was in the field in North Africa, and then in Europe, I often thanked God for the quartermaster corps who were frequently late, but always arrived. I have read that Rommel decided to withdraw from his lines in Africa by examining the rubble the American left behind. He could see we were far better supplied, and so ordered the lines moved back. That's why the People's Army of Korea failed at the Pusan Perimeter. It had superior numbers to UN Forces—but the UN Forces had better supplies and shorter lines.

Food and clothing were our first critical needs. We planned to escape in the spring and while the cold was still deadly, we would not be dealing with winter sub-zero temperatures, and the weather would only improve.

Our first opportunities came about by volunteering to chop wood. After being built, the camp needed wood for feeding the stoves and for the ski workshop. Yes, a ski workshop. The camp had a contract with the army to make skis. I had been on skis twice in my life and was not fond of the experience; Hobart had skied a lot in his former days, but only in sport. But when the call came for those who could work with wood, we volunteered. I had studied engineering at West Point, and it's surprising how much that can teach you. Hobart was also an engineer (of sewage systems!) and together we took apart a pair of skis and copied what we saw. We learned how to bend damp wood, dry it, and shape it. The bindings had been made for us, and we learned how to fasten them so they would stay strong and in place. In the meantime, we talked and planned and talked and planned some more.

The skis weren't much to look at, but when guards took them away and tested them, they returned, nodding. The skis were good.

Making skis may strike you as a heaven-sent opportunity to escape, and yes, Hobart and I discussed it. But we both agreed that skis would prove useless. The skis we made were tested on an open field far from the camp and then packed off to other places, perhaps for patrolling the steppes. We would be escaping through deep woods, and though Siberia has feet and feet of snow, the trees surrounding the camp would make it hard to ski at little more than a crawl.

Volunteering to help chop wood not only supplied our needs at the workshop, but it helped us to remain okay with the prisoners whose duty was this and this alone. Also, we kept an eye out for skins which would provide shoe materials for us as well as warmth and protection. Perhaps something to barter. Hobart always had his eyes open for drying wires set by the locals. He filched quite a few but not enough to rouse an alarm and to his credit, he never took all the skins. We also looked around for the best escape route. There was no “best” to be found. Everywhere the same heavy, enormous, snow-cloaked trees.

With my access to machinery, I sharpened nails to punch holes into the furs. With other instruments we cut the furs into strips. We would need thongs to keep our footgear in order and to tote what we had to carry. Our footgear was something like moccasins. We made gaiters from the furs as well. We made caps called “balaclavas” complete with ear flaps and panels down the back of our necks. We created backpacks for ourselves with provision bags, laced with thongs. How did we hide these furs that were going to save our lives?—the bunks were searched at least twice a week. We hid the furs by wearing them. Sometimes we grew uncomfortably hot in the ski workshop, which is a strange feeling in Siberia!

For food, we began rationing our bread. We then pickled it in honey; we had access to a barrel in the kitchens, which were behind the ski workshop. We stole pearl barley from an untied sack, a tea spoon at a time. We rationed our tobacco, a weed called “korizki,” which we rolled into cigarettes using newspaper. We were constantly thinking about what we needed, and searching for it. We bartered with other prisoners for food, furs, possessions, including a jackknife, which we made workable by oiling and sharpening the blade. We handed over a great deal of korizki for a sheepskin-lined jacket, which had once belonged, I assume, to an American airman. God knows how it got into Siberia.

We planned on buying some time after our escape by making the guards believe our bodies were safe in their bunks. We began gathering moss, hiding it in our bunks. Fortunately, our mattresses, if I can describe them as that, were so thin that the guards never searched them thoroughly so we stuffed the moss in there. The moss would then simulate our bodies under blankets. It was right out of the movies.

If one item proved our lifesaver, it was an axe. And we never used it violently.

Also, we had an axe, and perhaps that, more than anything other tool, assisted us to live. And we never used it violently, except against two animals we had to kill for food.

How did we get one? It was a gift from a sympathetic member of the camp's authority. That may seem unbelievable, but there were people who took pity on the prisoners, perhaps being little more than prisoners themselves, stranded in the Siberian countryside both physically and perhaps politically. They helped prisoners as they could with a little more food, a kind word, encouragement. Hobart was slipped an axe, by a party I will not name, and we made good use of it during our travels. We were also slipped a map of Siberia. The axe survived our journey—I used it to help make Hobart a resting place--the map disintegrated but not after we memorized it.

We planned to walk to the west. Actually, Asian countries such as Tibet and India were closer, and we would not have to deal with Soviets looking for us, or other Soviets becoming suspicious of two men toiling across the deserts and mountainsides. But that escape route was much more forbidding, including no less than the Gobi Desert which we calculated we would be crossing in the summer.

Our destination was Turkey, a country neither completely western nor eastern. Kemal Ataturk, the George Washington of Turkey, pushed Turkey toward the West in the twenties, and had actually declared for the Allies, though in February 1945. But it was a long distance away, and we could only hope that the sheer emptiness of parts of Russia would serve us. Yes, I will refer to it as Russia, not the USSR, as the USSR is more of a phenomenon of Moscow and Leningrad. There are vast places in Russia that have been Sovietized, but only superficially. You may not know that the tsars were known as "Tsar of *all* the Russias."

April was the first month in which escape was possible. It was still deadly cold, yet the cold was alleviating. We finally learned of a date, April 14--made known to us by one of the priests who tirelessly ministered to the flock—was Russian Orthodox Easter. It was sixteen days in the future, and the priest was asking who would attend a sunrise meeting.

The prisoners alternately listened to, sometimes jeered at, but were always respectful to these men who kept their faith alive. Hobart was a man who believed, and he was quietly sincere about it. When I asked him about why he believed, he admitted that he was raised as a kind of lukewarm believer, but the years of his imprisonment had made him kneel with complete belief at last. He couldn't explain why, and yet could. "I have no other reason for how I am alive after thirteen years. I believe God has protected my life, not that I have always appreciated some a special dispensation, if that is what it is."

"Oh?" I asked.

“I would have laid this burden many times...”

“Except for your wife and daughter,” I said. Somehow he had kept a picture of them. He had shown it to me once. Though smudged with wear I could still see a pretty young woman with a bobbed haircut, their equally pretty three year old daughter seated on her lap. Both were smiling.

“Yes. For them too. And I will see them again someday.”

We decided that April 4 was the day of escape— provided there was snow, which still fell, off and on. It could not be heavy snow that would blind us, but a light snow that would cover up our tracks. I am not a praying man, though Hobart’s prayers were answered as great circles of cotton-like flakes came wheeling down in the late afternoon of the third of April.

This was the night. The old phrase now or never kept going through my head. After the day finished, and we had our soup, bread, and ersatz coffee, we both thought: now what? We have five hours before midnight. Five of the longest hours on earth. In five hours we would leave for freedom, but in exchange give up a life that we knew, and were provided with some comforts. In Hobart’s life, it was a life that was thirteen years old.

John Hobart, whose body lies somewhere in the Caucasus mountains, somewhere between Turkey and the Soviet Union, was a remarkable man. As we worked in the ski shop, we talked a great deal, yet neither of us volunteered too much information about ourselves. That is a way that prisoners can protect themselves, not to let others in on your “secrets,” something that could be used to blackmail you, or something that could be beaten out of another person and used against you. Hobart was remarkable first because somehow he had survived, and second, never lost his sense of humor. Maybe he kept it because he knew it kept him alive. Older than myself by nearly ten years, Hobart moved carefully, as if to shepherd his strength. He had scars “from beatings,” and a wrist that never quit hurting as it had been broken and never properly mended. His eyes were both solemn and bemused. He seemed to have turned life into a joke, but a joke that he intended to retaliate upon someday, though not viciously.

His greatest joke was played the night we intended to escape. “Let’s go to the political meeting tonight.”

Rather than saying, “hell, no”—I had avoided going to such meetings for months now even if by going you would get an extra dose of korizki—the idea tickled me. These political meetings, wisely, were voluntary, which was more the decision of our local commissar than Moscow. Our commissar never insisted on anybody attending these meetings. Some attendees went because they were thinking of their future: if and when a prisoner was released, he had little enough future in the world, and many of them actually ended up living near and serving in the prison.

Attending dutifully, listening, even asking questions about what the political officer droned about might give them some favor in the future. We had no such plans and for 90 minutes, enjoyed the warmth of the stove. We tried to soak it in as we would soon be cold as hell, even if free. Our political officer actually beamed at us. Since it was known we were Americans, our presence there was exciting. He was in fine form that night; describing over and over the miracle of the Soviet Union, the value of honest toil, self-discipline, and the glorious ideal of international Communism when all classes would disappear. The capitalists were decadent as was proven in the war; the mighty Soviet Army destroyed the Nazis. Though my Russian had improved, he spoke so enthusiastically and with such a heavy accent—Georgian, like Stalin—that I only picked up a word here and there, but nodded, equally enthusiastically. Hobart crowned the event with jumping up and crying, in English and in Russian, “death to the capitalists!” I figured that this would give us away, but the poor soul was so happy with Hobart’s support, that he couldn’t figure out his leg was being pulled, practically out of its socket. I hope he did not suffer too much when his two best customers that night did not show up in the breakfast line the next morning.

Some three hours later, our barracks were quiet. We were dressed down to our moccasins. We even fastened our backpacks on before lying down. I could hear Hobart actually sleeping. For a long time I actually wondered if the whole last five months had been a dream. How could somebody sleep? I debated whether to wake him up.

But he awoke, on schedule, touched my shoulder which meant “now.” I got up, and rumbled up the moss to make it look as though it were a body still in the bunk.

Our barracks were barricaded but not securely locked, and lifting up the bar on the outside of the door was child’s play. We stepped out into a heavy but feathery snowfall. That meant that our footprints would be immediately concealed. The first wire was one hundred feet away and we knew exactly where we would slip under: there was a dip of ground beneath the straight wire, just enough to let our bodies slide under. We slid on our bellies and one barb caught on my backpack. It took Hobart about two minutes to free me; it could have been two hours. We then crossed the moat and came to our first real challenge: the palisade of raw logs. The plan was a simple and painful one: and it worked. Forming a stirrup with his hands, and with strength dragged up from somewhere, Hobart launched me up first because I was taller. I made the top of the wall. I then used the axe to chop into the wood; the noise was muffled but I was sure I was being heard in Moscow. When I had the room, I slid down and under the barbed wire, braced every part of my anatomy and reached down to grab his hands. We had mentally measured it, and twice practiced it in the woods when we volunteered for wood chopping. He couldn’t make it. I could not reach down far enough, he could not reach up far enough. And then, he was rising to get my hands. He came up so violently that I nearly lost my balance. We cleared the barbed wire and jumped into the snow.

I can't say for sure what happened. Hobart told me a few days later, when we were too exhausted to go on, that somebody helped him.

"Who the hell?" I demanded.

"Nobody who sounded an alarm," he said. "Either some poor soul saw what was going on and decided to help, or that guardian angel we all need gave my ass a boost."

Rather than comforting me, his explanation scared me.

Of course, before we discussed this event we were running, directly south as far as we could figure the direction. Our first headlong rush became a steady lope, as we sought to put as much distance between us and the camp. At the dawn of our night of escape, we kept going, only pausing to melt some snow in our mouths. At noon, or so, we stopped. We stopped because we had run into a depression, and neither of us had the strength to get out of it at the moment. Hobart dragged out the sheepskin coat out and we searched around for a place to sleep. In Siberia, the snow can be your friend, if you let it. Wind was the enemy. We found a tree with roots like a fortress. We scooped the snow and made it into a wall against which we placed the jacket. Hobart cut branches with the axe and built a roof of sorts over the covered branches and we piled snow on that. We crawled in and despite the closeness, we lighted our korizki and smoked. Our nerves quieted. We didn't feel like eating, but we pulled out two honey-soaked pieces of bread from our packs and gnawed on them. At the moment a cup of ersatz coffee would taste better than any coffee from the finest drip system available. We slept through the afternoon and then the night. I got up and out long enough to point a stick toward the north. When we arose under cloudy skies, which was perpetual, we could always find our way. I have to admit, that night I could only assume I had pointed the stick in the right way.

For the first nine days we trekked southeast, searching for the river Angara. We would follow it to its lake. We would then strike straight east to places that I am not liberty to name, as we fear retaliation on those who helped us.

Day 9: By now we were walking, though as swiftly as possible. Though nearly ten days had gone by since some luckless guard discovered our moss "bodies" we were still in fear, every unusual sound scaring us. I identify Day 9 because after this, the days ran into each other. I thought about notching a stick to make the days, and then I thought, why? We had all the time in the world to either escape or be run to earth and killed, either by pursuers or our own exhaustion.

Day 9 is also notable as we finally saw the Angara. We also had some luck. A creature that looked like a badger, perhaps from old age, was floundering in the snow. We flanked it and though it fought us, we brought tree limbs down on it, and then swiftly skinned it and ate some

of it raw. We wrapped the remains in the skin, and decided in a few more days we would hazard a fire, and cook or dry it.

By now, the going was easier as the ground drifted into a river valley. Also, spring was making undeniable strides as bare spots began to emerge from the snow, like pools of water in a desert. Tough Siberian grass appeared. We passed out of forests, and the Angara appeared. When we approached it, we could see the ice breaking up as fine cracks widened. "Well, you first, Little Eva," Hobart told me. "No, Uncle Tom, after you," I told him. "Although it was Eliza who escaped over the ice floes."

"Well, hoity toity," Hobart said, flipping his hand, his first real show of humor in our flight, and how good it sounded. Then he said, "By God, we hit the first landmark, Pres. We are on our way." That night, for the first time, he pulled out the tiny picture of "his girls," and kissed them. "Still waiting for me. They have to wait a little longer."

Rather than crossing the Angara that afternoon, we decided to allow the ice to harden overnight. Believe it or not, fear of being recaptured still held up our hunger. We had gnawed on the bread and the badger for nine days without tasting either. With one objective gained, we decided to celebrate that night by our first hot meal. After building our usual camp of snow heaped over branches, we started a fire, using a match, and pulled out our mug— not two, but one mug, an aluminum cup that Hobart had picked up years before in a card game. Into the cup we put water, pearl barley, and salt. We craved the salt even more than the gruel we were cooking. We shared the mug and elected to make another. Oddly enough, we felt stuffed with our second shared cup. We doused the fire and crawled into our shelter. By morning, with the clear sunrise a kind of beacon of hope and not the signal of fear, we felt a fresh surge of confidence. If we had made it this far, surely we had lost any parties hunting for us. We had some more luck when we cautiously walked across the ice. Hobart had just said, "I recall from being a Boy Scout that in the winter you can catch fish by breaking a hole in the ice—" The moment he said that my foot cracked a seam, and we both jumped back. Down on our hands and knees, I said, "Let's try to break a hole." We did with our fists and three small fish jumped out, practically into our hands. We were as excited as the boys we once were. However, the surrounding ice was reacting to our fishing expedition, and we crawled to our feet and got to the other side.

A king could have dined no better that night as we broiled the fish over our second fire for which we sacrificed a second precious match. Sprinkled with some of the precious salt, I can at no time remember a fish tasting so fine. As for the matches, we had about a dozen, courtesy of Hobart. He filched a few every time when he was visiting the commissar's wife—to read to her. I will give no more details except to say that she was learning English by having him read a child

raising manual to her. We understood that the child was with the commissar and his wife, but we never saw either of them in that camp.

From there on, it is difficult to remember in sequence the lands we passed through. For one, we had emerged from the forests which as terrible as they had been, gave us cover. We now were confronted with what might be considered a steppe, which was a long sweep of rolling ground studded here and there with trees. Somewhere out there, according to the map fragments were the villages of Tanguy and Tayshet. These were only markers for us, we had no intention of entering them. Beyond these places, we were seeking Akinsk, Tomsk and Novosibirsk, to name a few places that we could make out on the disintegrating map.

By what was perhaps the 21st day of our walk, we had seen no one. That morning, we were walking through a ground mist and we heard a cough. Low, but distinct. We stopped and looked at each and I had an odd thought—I felt like we were Laurel and Hardy confronting angry wives and looking at each other for support.

Another cough and then another...and a moan. "That's an animal," Hobart said. We listened and our ears finally led us to a wolf, its legs caught in a terrible trap. It caught our scent and stared at us. We could see the whites of its eyes as they rolled in fear and pain. Hobart actually sighed in pity, but as he did this he was walking forward with the axe. He killed it with a couple of blows. I swear the wolf grew calm when he approached.

"I wonder how the Big Bad Wolf tastes?" he then asked. I had to chop the legs free. We then dragged the carcass to one shelter we could find, a tree bent double from winds. We built a fire and I slit and gutted the carcass with the old jackknife. We could not wait for the joints to finish cooking; we kept cutting off strips and eating them...and ate until we had the strange feelings of being full. We would pack out the rest of the meat. We spent two days cleaning and stretching the skin. We saved all the fat, and even tried to save the blood.

"We should pray over this wolf," said Hobart as we completed our work.

I have never prayed too much in my life, figuring that if there is some kind of central intelligence, praying would make no difference. But a prayer of thanks sounded like a good idea. We stood up, bowed our heads and Hobart spoke his thanks to the wolf, for helping us; he said its end was violent, but quick, and we would be forever grateful for the creature's death that allowed us to be stronger and to live.

May was in full swing—even in Siberia, May is noticeable—and we were swinging along fairly well. We had not been sick, no injuries. Better, no fighting. Even coming into more inhabited areas did not scare us, much, but we took efforts to avoid any kind of contact. No fire in our nightly camp, because somebody might see it. We began to search out lights of villages, and on

occasion heard hens squawking, a horse shrilling. One morning, sleeping in our brush hut, we heard the sound of human voices other than our own. Those terrified us and we waited a full hour that morning before crawling out of our shelter and peering about before getting on our way.

When we came to the next river we rolled up our backpacks, clothes, and shoes, and holding them above our heads, we paddled our bodies like hell, then crawled up the bank and found a patch of dry ground hidden by reeds and rushes. We dried off as we could and after nightfall, we built a fire and gnawed on wolf. We got some sleep, and in the morning, were awakened by the shouts of naked boys running up to the river to dive in, splash, yell, fight, crawl out, roll and light cigarettes and dry off.

That gave us a day off of sorts. We had to sit still and wait on them to leave. When they finally did, we ran like hell in the gathering twilight till we came to another small river. We decided to stop for the night. Hobart chuckled as we ate our usual spare meal. "I haven't thought about playing hooky for years...once in a while I chucked the books for the swimming hole and spent the day there. Before going to the hole I hid in a barn for about an hour and waited for the school bell to quit ringing. One day I heard some voices coming out of the loft. I think it was the farmer's daughter and the hired man who had too much fun the night before and didn't wake up in time...Learned a lot, including how mad a father can be when he catches his daughter in the hay. But I never played hooky again. Did you ever?"

"As a matter of fact... I didn't," I told him.

"Too scared?"

"No, it just didn't seem right." I know I sounded priggish, but that is the way I felt. I found myself wishing now I had played hooky a few times...my younger brother did and it didn't hurt him any. That was the first time I had thought of my own family since our flight commenced.

Our conversation happened right at the moment we sensed there was somebody near us. We heard a noise of movement and caught sight of a body moving in a way that meant it was trying to hide. Figuring we were being ratted out, we gave chase.

As it turned out, it was a kid. But we did not know this for a while. The figure had gone still and then it suddenly darted from behind a tree and threw itself into a mass of bushes, and there it stayed, despite fighting the branches. Its boots of black rubber, topped with felt, were so tempting I thought, as did Hobart, of grabbing the boots and running.

Instead, we grabbed the booted feet and started wrestling the body out of the bush. It was covered with long black trousers and a heavy jacket. "It" turned out to be a young boy, no more than fifteen. Despite his years and his strength—he was holding us both off—he was shrieking

with terror and our first task was to shut him up. We finally did, with us both panting as we sat on top of him. I had hold of his arms and stared down into his face. He was blonde and his eyes were as blue as the sky. Only a small beard covered parts of his cheeks and chin.

Hobart knew enough German to recognize some of his words. The boy finally sobbed, "Can you let me go?" Feeling a little ashamed of ourselves, we got off of him, but we were ready for him to run again. He seemed to realize that we were ready to repeat our actions and after getting to his knees, he stayed slumped on them.

"We are sorry to have done that," said Hobart in halting German. The boy looked at us and as we later learned, had reason to be scared of us, even beyond our appearance. "Please don't cry anymore. Are you hungry?"

"Da," he said, figuring we were Russian. Days later, when we told him we were Americans, he didn't believe us, but when we finally convinced him, he was full of questions about the United States—did everybody have a car? But this came later. At this time, we rustled into our packs and found the last of the wolf meat. He ate the chunks carefully, eyeing us, as though expecting us to yell boo at him. Hobart then offered him some water and he drank. He then rolled a cigarette for the boy, and the kid took it gratefully. He sat quietly, seemingly giving up ideas of escape. But he kept eyeing us and every time we glanced at him, he brought drew back and met our glance head on. We realized later that he was expecting us to demand a return for the food.

At the moment, we were figuring: what was the next step? Despite everything we had been through, seeing the boy, capturing him, and then calming him down left us exhausted, emotionally and physically. A third person was among us, and we were far from sure wanting to trust him.

We heaped our packs against several logs we pushed together. We pushed upright two more logs and draped our jacket and furs over them and made a fire. The young man observed all this, not trying to help, which was helpful to us. We cooked our dinner of barley, but was sparing as we were running low on what little stores we had. Unless we found some game or had some luck with fishing, we would have to raid a barn, which we disliked for the danger and for stealing food from hungry people. Hobart had witnessed a little bit of the Ukraine after Stalin's collectivization of the farms and the memories could still shake him. We divided the barley into equal portions, spared some salt, and ate. The boy then curled up among our packs and fell asleep.

Before we took our usual turns sleeping, we asked each other, "Should we take the boy with us?"

How could we not, we agreed. In the morning, we further reduced our food stores, and gave him, in way of welcome perhaps, the last piece of fish, salted and smelly. "Thank you," he said in Russian.

Hobart pieced together enough German to say, "We are Americans. We are going to Turkey. You can speak Russian if you wish." The boy shrugged at our story, but seemed ready to talk.

I spoke, using some Russian. How did he get where we found him?

He answered, using his own Russian which Hobart translated. Miserable story, one of many millions, I suppose. The boy had grown up in Magdeburg. Both his parents were sick when the Russians came. They knew the Russians were their enemy but did not know how the Russians were scorched with hatred, meeting peaceful surrender with violence. He and his family stayed in their house, hoping for the best when the first troops began to arrive, but they sent their only son, who was only ten years old, up to the attic. Franz, as we finally learned was his name, stayed hidden there, first frightened, and then shocked, and finally dully accepting that the screams he had heard had been his parents. When he finally dared to come down, after three days without food or water, he found that his mother had been raped and strangled, and his father gutted like a fish, in his sick bed. His face had been shot off.

He took a drink of water from a broken pipe, took what was left of the food, and started walking. All hell had broken loose and he became confused and actually headed into Russia. Sometime in the fall he was captured and for some reason they spared his life. Maybe the people who caught him were tired of violence. With a group of both men and women—German, Hungarian, Polish, Lithuanian—they escaped when the guards became drunk, as they did nightly, probably figuring who would want to escape into the enormous nothingness of the Soviet Union. They did. For over three years they roamed. It was not an easy life. Both the men and women volunteered for work on various farms they encountered, and the people, who were both frightened and hateful of the local officials, would hire them, paying them with food. They stole what they could, but there was little to steal.

Finally, he was captured by a sentry at a plant. Franz declared he had done nothing, so perhaps the sentry was bored or trying to meet a quota. He got bundled up with other prisoners and put on a train and then was set before a board for a trial. By now he could speak Russian fluently, and in the absence of any kind of identification the board decided that he was Russian. But he still needed punishing. He was sent with the other youthful prisoners to a prison farm, it seemed. He was set to threshing and sacking corn along with other young men and women. One by one they—boys and girls—were all "interrogated" by the foreman and two other men. When it came his turn, he hid and ran away. He knew by the whispers from the interrogated what awaited him.

“Is that all?” Hobart asked. “Meaning, you just ran away?”

“Yes,” the boy said. You can tell real crying, and he was doing it.

“Where are you running to?”

“With you, if you will let me,” he said. “I would like to go to Turkey.”

“You will carry what you can, and share food.” Hobart’s voice was kind, but firm.

He agreed. The tears stopped, which made me suspicious. But if his story were true, he had learned to survive, to cry when he had to, to stop when it was time to stop.

We trekked in our usual fashion, steadily moving to the next tree, or anything that would allow us to hide in the open landscape. Franz kept up quite well and didn’t complain of hunger or weariness. When we finally ended our sprint for the day, Franz tottered into the spot we selected to hide in, threw down his bag and collapsed.

He was so tired that we did not waken him to eat, but we spared his share. Our conversation around the fire was simple: Was the boy telling the truth? Was he a spy or an agent?

We knocked various theories about—including how maybe our commissar had sent the boy to lure us into a trap. No, if we could be found as the boy had “found” us we would have been captured or shot on the spot. Perhaps officials—whatever kind of officials— wanted him to follow us, believing we were after something. “Like what?” Hobart asked, reasonably.

“You said you mined diamonds in the Urals—perhaps they suspected you are trying to find a treasure you hid a long time ago.”

“If they thought that about me, they would have beaten me out of it a long time ago.”

I then told him about a story I heard. A pilot had been shot down in Switzerland, and couldn’t pause there to deal with the Swiss’s tender mercies, if they have any—which they called “internment.” For a peaceful people, they are the most calculating on earth and will not acknowledge charges made by Allied airmen who suffered certain aspects of “internment”—abuse, and at times rape. This pilot had information to get out of Switzerland and in ways he never understood and didn’t dare ask about, was figured he had been given a chance to escape by a sympathetic contact. Without intending to, he hooked up with a deserting German soldier and then with a member of the broken Underground. They made their way to the coast of France. It turned out that this deserter was Waffen SS and he had followed the trail to report on it. “Suffice to say he died before he could report,” I said.

“So what are you saying?” Hobart asked. “We have no underground to follow—we are making this trail up, step by step, day by day.”

“Yeah,” I had to agree. “So, what do we do with this kid?”

Hobart was the most equable man I had ever met. He said, “We have no reason to trust him as well as no real reason to distrust him. So, we trust him until he gives us a reason to distrust him. We distrust him until he gives us reason to trust him.”

It seemed reasonable. However, Hobart immediately gave us a reason to distrust him. The boy’s hands were in too good a condition to have been involved with threshing and sacking.

“Though,” he granted, “maybe he wasn’t doing such work for long. If he got hauled in for fall threshing, that would have been over five, six months ago.”

“Are you thinking the way I am thinking about the ‘interrogation’?” I asked.

Prison life is known for homosexual activities. We both witnessed such in our various prisons. Attractive young boys—any young boy-- are prey for those who still have such desire or the boy is seeking more food. Franz was still good looking enough and young enough to be called in early by the “interrogators.” We didn’t know how to address this or ask about it and finally we agreed not even to try. However, the still good appearance of his hands bothered us, and we again discussed the possibility of him being “sent to us” by those pursuing us.

“But to what point?” Hobart still asked. “If our pursuers, if they are out there—well, why don’t they kill us, or snatch us up? Why do they send a boy to be some kind of decoy?”

That question caused us to regard each other again. Admittedly, when we two Americans came into each other’s orbit in Camp 303, and then were carried away together to Camp 303-A we had looked askance at each other more than once. Were we plants to draw the other one out? I had been captured in Europe while trying to complete a special mission. However, Hobart had never asked a question about my being behind the lines. He never seemed curious about why I asked so little about his own story, which he had volunteered to me. However, he always kept his story simple, as I kept my own. It had occurred to me more than once, as it had Hobart, that perhaps we were in observation of the other one, and maybe a midnight session with interrogators would try to beat something out of us...which is why we kept our information so limited; you can’t tell what you don’t know.

The next morning, before dawn, we were up and smothering all signs of a camp being there. Franz woke up, and sat there, until he asked, politely, if he could do anything. Hobart, in the middle of checking our food stores, which were nearing the bottom, said, “How are you at finding food?”

He grinned. “The best! I did that for two years.”

“I thought you said three,” said Hobart, easily.

“Two, three, it all went together. I am not even sure how old I am. I think I am fifteen.”

We took the answer at face value. We decided to eat what we had, and commenced our “daily stroll” as we described our trek at times. We were entering more and more into lands where one felt the bustle of life. Factory whistles screeched, cattle lowed, and a bell would ring out. Though the desolate forests hadn’t been pleasant, their concealment had been our friend. Now we had to deal with people.

For three days we zigged and zagged through field and bog at the sign of any smoke and it was time wasting and monotonous. We were searching for the town of Chulyin to tell us that we were still walking eastward, with our next objective the city Omsk. Our only food for three days had been taken from a horse carcass; the poor thing had collapsed in harness, with the owner mourning his loss at the side of the half-tilled field. This was the first time we actually made contact with anybody. In exchange for horse meat we had actually helped the man plow his field, taking the harness over our back and pulling. It was grotesquely hard and we were so hungry at day’s end that I scarcely cared when I plunged our hatchet into the flank. The farmer, wiping his eyes, had stroked its neck as we took our carvings then waved us on. “He will finish it,” Franz said. “His family is hungry too.” Franz added that the man told him that Chulyin was ten miles in the east, so we had bypassed it completely.

“Should we trust him?” I muttered. “He could be telling us damn near anything. You said you couldn’t understand half of what he said because of his accent.”

“Well, all things considered, we are moving to west,” Hobart said. We faithfully set up our direction finder at night, and even did things like lay petals on it in case the boy would get up and fiddle with it. The next day, our rather fragile faith in the boy was rewarded when we dared tramp alongside a country road that was currently as dusty as hell as there had been no rain in a week. A sign, spotted at a distance, provided directions Tatarsk, a town on the route to Omsk.

Did I feel bad about not trusting the boy? Yes, mainly because it was another worry. Franz seemed a damned good kid. He walked without complaint, accepted the portion given to him, and was youthful enough still to have dreams that more than once roused him with a bleat of fear. He offered no other information about himself except that he studied piano because his mother wanted him to. On occasion he hummed snatches of music. I will say that we never used him as a mule. We all carried our own stuff which was getting heavier as we had shed as much winter clothing as we could. When we finally believed we were Americans he asked many questions about the tall buildings, the Indians, the cars.

We tramped for three more days, living off the horse meat which was beginning to smell, despite our efforts of preserving by smoking it. Tatarsk was close by; we could hear noises of a drill, and a blast somewhere of a train whistle—we were closer to the Transiberian Railroad

than we realized. We hid in scrubby trees when a farmer and his wife walked by. The sight of a woman caused us all to catch our breaths. She was tiny, wrapped in three layers of dirty cloth, and her head bound up in an ancient kerchief, but we stared at her.

By now we were smoking a sweet grass that Franz had identified as “usable.” He had learned about it when he was roaming with the boys. It was called sweet but tasted lousy but it was amazing how a smoke of something pretty awful can give a kick of energy. But, in the language of this day and age, it didn’t produce any “trips.”

That night we were both awake, possibly due to the sweet grass. I will attest now that the grass, which has been identified for me as “glyceria maximus” has some qualities that make you a bit giddy. That was quite a feeling for two men who had been on the run for what he now figured was 88 days. Almost three months, which made the date, we realized as some time in early July.

Hobart got to talking about firecrackers on the Fourth. “Soon as the sun was up, we were lighting whole strings of them,” he laughed. “No adult slept in that morning!”

I remembered a sad event. “Firecrackers scared a neighbor dog who ran smack under a truck.”

“Remember anything else, like corn on the cob, watermelon, and fireworks?” Hobart said.

“Yeah, but that...poor dog.” I was exhausted, hungry, and felt the drag of the last ninety days. The mosquitoes didn’t help.

“Come on, buck up, buck up,” Hobart said warningly. We lighted more cigarettes, appreciating how the smoke kept the mosquitoes at bay. “We need a joke. Since we are traveling men, the joke about the traveling salesman looking for a place to sleep for the night is a good one...”

“Yes?” I said, but not too eagerly. As always, hunger kept thoughts of sex far away.

“I—don’t know. That joke always seemed a joke about a joke. I never did learn what the traveling salesman did for the night. If I were him, I would have said to hell with the daughter and asked for dinner.”

“You know,” I said, “that sounds like you. You eat what is set before you.”

“So do you,” Hobart said.

“But not with your grace. You always see the funny side of things.”

“Life is either a comedy or a tragedy. If it’s a tragedy, then try to make it into a comedy.”

“Sounds kind of Shakespearean.”

"Ah, the mighty Bard of Avon." Hobart leaned back and looked up into the sky. "Some of his comedies were pretty grim. Now take *Twelfth Night*..."

"No, you take it," I said, a bit joshingly. "I thought you said you were an engineer."

"Who originally wanted to be a teacher of literature in some Midwestern college...where I would probably be teaching Babbitts, or sons of Babbitt," he said, referring to Sinclair Lewis's vision of the Midwestern man of business, increasingly dissatisfied with his world based on money and some conception of American success. I had read it under duress in high school and thought that Babbitt was a jerk.

"What happened?"

"I proved to be a Babbitt when my father pointed out the difference in salaries of an English teacher and an engineer. Lucre took over, promoted by my wife's father who demanded something more than an English teacher to give his only daughter to. I am a walking cautionary tale. Had I been an English teacher, I would probably be snugly immured in some gabled home...reading, sipping cheap sherry and perhaps trying to write a novel."

"What about?"

"God knows. It is said you have to experience life to write...and you know," he said, with a note of excitement, "I will write about our journey! Ah..." he said, drawing deeply on his sweet grass. "My wife would be pleased...She liked the money my engineering brought in, mainly for our daughter's raising. But she knew how much I loved reading. Made sure I always had an hour to read every night before supper."

We continued talking into the night until we both fell asleep. That was the first time we had done such a thing, and when we awoke later than usual in the morning, Franz was boiling an egg in our single aluminum cup. A handy lad, he had built up the fire.

We were startled rather than pleased. "Where the hell did you get that?" Hobart demanded.

"Stole it from a farm near here," the boy said. "And two more. I got up early when I heard some hens..."

"If he had been found out, somebody would be here by now I imagine," I said, for once soothing Hobart.

"Yeah, true, but after that egg boils, we get out of here. And we can't return the other two without danger, so I guess we have eggs for dinner."

As we packed, and tried to destroy any sign of our being there, we cracked the egg and split it three ways. It gave us the energy to move on, but Hobart was disturbed. "Don't ever leave without telling us," he told the boy. "Please!"

Franz was eager to soothe Hobart. "You two were sleeping so I took a chance. Mr. Hobart, you have been very good to me and if I could repay you—and I have much experience with stealing after living like that for three years--"

"Repay me by telling us your movements," Hobart snapped, but then smiled. "We hang together by trusting each other. That was not very trustworthy. But I admit, maybe I never laid that rule down to you. I apologize. The eggs are a wonderful treat."

"Thank you sir," the boy whispered.

We tramped along, keeping what road there was in sight as we dipped and looked through the brush, over small rivers, and skirting fields to get into scrub. "Trust or distrust," I finally asked Hobart when the kid stopped for the call to nature.

"Can't say," Hobart said. "But I think he's taking chances for us, not just for himself."

We realized how much he had taken chances when he cautiously produced a pair of scissors when we ended our trek for the day. He claimed his foot dislodged them from a pile of rubbish near the hen house he had visited. When Hobart shook his head slightly, the boy admitted that he gotten into the farmhouse by an open door...saw the scissors on a table and snatched them.

Old things, but kept well. And how handy a pair of scissors could be. We could cut our hair and trim our beards. I worked on sharpening the blades by skinning the edge against a smooth rock while Hobart lectured the boy about stealing. "It's not moral," he said. "It's the danger. In some villages around here, that might be the only pair of scissors around. People might come after us seeking those things."

"I understand sir," said Franz. "There was food in the kitchen sir. I didn't touch it."

He was so humble that Hobart patted him on the shoulder. He flinched slightly. My suspicions came up: did he hate Hobart or did such touching call to mind obscene things done to him... We tramped on the next day, in our usual zig zag style. In mid-afternoon, we then encountered a broad stream rushing downhill just enough to produce clear frothy water. It was so quiet, and so clean and so free of mosquitoes that Hobart said, "Let's take a vacation at the beach!" We camped in a tangle of shrubbery, and keeping watch for a while, we decided by the time evening shadows fell, we would bathe, scrub what clothing we could, cut our hair and trim our beards. Not just for beauty, we joked, but we but we were approaching Omsk, and we had to route through the city to cross one of the bridges over the River Om, too broad and deep to

swim across. Franz offered to stand watch while we scrubbed off. We both stripped off and Hobart and I slid into the cold water and I wondered why, when I was boy, I complained about washing up! Quite naked while our clothes dried—we pounded them on the rocks to knock the dirt out—in the absence of mirrors, we cut each other’s hair and trimmed each other’s beard. A bad moment came when a farmer, on the other side, drove his cow to the water. We sat in the long twilight and waited. By now, our hearts didn’t pound like they once did, but we were wary. That night, we avoided smoking to stay awake, take watches and to see that Franz stayed put. He said, “Of course, sir,” when Hobart laid down the law, or the rules. He offered to stand the watch. “Get your sleep, youngster,” Hobart said. He nodded and then in English, which he had been learning, “Good night, sir.”

Omsk was ahead. Bridge crossings meant guards. The best way to cross the bridge was to look above suspicion which was difficult to attain in Soviet Russia even when completely innocent. Even with clean or at least cleaner clothes, and short hair and trimmed beards, we were still not good to behold, particularly since our clothes were flapping on our wasted frames, and our moccasins were patched and ragged.

We spotted Omsk in the afternoon. We camped on some bluffs outside of the city. The two of the largest buildings were cathedrals or churches, one with the bulbous top. We also saw factories, still intact as Omsk was well away from the frontlines of war. There were three bridges which was actually bad for us. A single bridge might mean we might get lost in the packed flow of traffic.

“Sir, I have an idea about crossing the bridge,” Franz said after we settled into our camp. He spoke in Russian that Hobart translated. “He said, he would go ahead of us. The homes at the edge of the town might have clothes to steal. He will take them and drop them along the way for us to find and put on.” Though I didn’t think my face had moved a muscle, he still could sense my skepticism. “If he stayed alive for three years with that pack of boys, he must be an accomplished thief.”

“All right,” I agreed. “As long as he’s stealing clothes, tell him to steal some food, too.”

Hobart said so and the boy laughed, nodding his head. Later I remarked, “West Point and the Army didn’t teach me about theft.”

“But you learned survival skills right? These are them, in spades.” He was right.

In the mid-morning, we got started, reasoning if there was washing going on in the wooden huts along the road, a strip of asphalt, things would be hung on bushes or fences. Our reasoning proved right. To waylay suspicion, if anybody was watching us from out of those glassless windows, we swung along as if we had every right to be there. We jumped when a car honked

at us from behind. A dusty vehicle trundled by and we stared at it like a couple of rubes from the hills. "If we stole one of those," Hobart said jokingly, "we'd have to steal gas, too."

Franz moved ahead of us, walking along briskly. We dawdled along, as if we didn't have a care in the world; but a rabbit wrinkling its nose at us would have made me jump.

Franz was good. He would drift along the hedges, looking for lookouts. In a twinkling, his hand would flip an article of clothing away and we figured it disappeared into his trousers. We kept sauntering, our mouths drying out with every person we passed; we greeted them as we dared; in some places a smile would create suspicion.

We entered the outskirts of Omsk. As we walked along the broad streets, toward the river, we were impressed with how clean and active the place seemed. We walked purposefully, but slowly, and nobody seemed to notice us. Seemed, I repeat. Needless to say, we were also sending a few glances about for Franz. At last, we saw him idling in an alleyway between two ugly buildings.

We drifted up to him, putting pre-rolled cigarettes in our mouths and asking for a light from his. He gave it and we strolled on, each stuffing a bit of the clothing he had pilfered into our current clothing. What he handed us was in pretty poor condition but at least they didn't have a kind of prison pallor. In a backway, we threw off what we were wearing, and donned the "new stuff"—it was clean, at least, and though we looked pretty much like scarecrows, we might be able to cross the bridge without being noticed. We rolled our old clothes around our waists to make us look less cadaverous.

Franz then motioned us into a patch of potatoes probably being grown secretly between the buildings. There were no windows in the walls flanking us. He produced a small bag with rubles. Hobart frowned, and then laughed a bit. "Okay, the tiger can't change its stripes. Got a little bit of the easy touch, right?" Of course, this was said in Russian, but I could see Franz's happiness in his successful work. I had a thought—if he were to return to "normal" would he continue stealing?

We decided to get across the bridge in the evening, at a time when it was at its busiest, so we could blend in. Franz muttered something as we slowly drifted down the road to the bridge. Hobart translated: we should try to copy people's expressions; if they had any kind of insignia, if they seemed to do something all alike. To our observation, Omskites seemed to have two expressions: neutral and grim. There would be an occasional burst of laughter but mainly the conversations, if there were any, were mumbled.

We came to the bridge, a relic of the time of the Tsars. Trucks and a few cars cautiously drove over it. As we walked along the pedestrian path, we observed faceless figures, probably saints, carved onto the bridge's railing. Soot and grease further marred them.

"Where's Franz?" Hobart said. We glanced up and around, and saw the boy well ahead of us, moving right to the guard who seemed to be merely keeping an eye on the traffic. We slowed down, trying to figure out what was going on. Franz walked boldly past the guard, and then he was stopped. We nearly did too, but kept moving, despite the fact that Franz was laughing and pointing...to us. We kept walking, knowing that turning and running might be the wrong decision. The guard considered us. We came closer. Franz was staring at us, waiting for us...and when we came up to him, he threw his arms around us and kissed us, on both our cheeks. At the moment I could not think. Hobart could. He spoke in Russian, the guard did not seem to understand him, but Franz chimed in. He linked his arms into ours, and began singing. Hobart offered the man one of our eight rubles and we went on our way...across the bridge, and onto the western side of the river.

The guard shouted after us. Franz turned and waved. "Well?" Hobart demanded of Franz. The boy spoke to Hobart, who later reported to me after we quietly left the road for a lane and then off the lane into what brush we could find. "He had been warned about the guards at the bridge. They don't shake everybody down, just at random. People he doesn't recognize he always stops. That's why Franz went on ahead to more or less call attention to us and so we can pay with good humor. It seemed to work."

I had to agree. We walked for about a mile, then camped.

Franz pointed out a tiny wink of light. "I could see what is in there."

Hobart and I refused, saying he had risked his neck too many times already. "It is riskable," he said.

"What about ours?" Hobart said.

"I risk only mine."

"Well, please, leave it alone for a while. We're all right."

He shrugged. We divided our food, and regretted the potatoes had not been ready for digging. But we ate them anyway.

If you think it is amazing that none of us had been sick, that changed during the night. I don't know what I consumed, or what hit me, but I was sick the next morning. I tried to throw it off, and I got up and marched, but finally my fever began to make me start seeing two of everything, and by evening I drifted off into a hot swirling place that had me trapped.

Fortunately, I was not sick long and was never delirious but things seem to be in a fog. But when I woke up, weak but clear-minded I found myself in a half-gone shed, and Hobart and Franz were studying the map. They had pieced it together on the dirty straw of the floor. Franz was the first to see I was awake. When I asked what had happened, Hobart assured me I had been sick for only three days. I was upset because despite the fact we were in high summer, fall and winter were on the horizon, and our final obstacle was a terrible one: the Caucasus Mountains.

“We’re fine,” Hobart said.

My question was how: we were almost housekeeping in the barn, which despite its poor condition seemed luxurious. Franz assured me all was well; the people in the cottage nearby—which I would really describe as a hut—were happy to help. One of the many groups in the Soviet Union who do not hold themselves as Russian, or Soviet, or Communist. Still, Hobart and Franz took a chance trusting them, as they could have talked to some authority somewhere as a method of barter.

Franz left to get some more water and Hobart offered me something that approximated coffee or perhaps it was tea. It was hot and I enjoyed it but I was still uneasy and so was Hobart who was trying to hide it. We could now read each other like books with big print. That evening Hobart urged me to doze off and then began yawning mightily, and settling down to sleep. By this time he had poked me with a stick to keep awake and so I did as we pretended to sleep. Franz waited a good long time and then left. Hobart came to his feet and took off after him, without a word to me. I had to wait and it was a terribly long one. After a long, very long time I rolled to my feet and started packing up what I could, convinced I would have to leave at dawn, if not before. Alone.

I saw Hobart approaching and ashamed of myself, I got back onto the pile of straw that was my bed. When Hobart sat down, breathing hard, I waited and finally asked “What gives?” “The boy. I followed him back to Omsk. He had a rendezvous with that guard—“

“What?”

“And got paid with potatoes. We’ll have those for breakfast.”

I groaned with disgust. I could still somehow raise up that emotion, though I hardly know from where.

Hobart let me have it. “Come off it! He isn’t having fun! That’s the hell he’s survived—he told us that he worked in the fields until he was called into the interrogators at that farm—like hell. He was probably was with the interrogators until they got tired of him and kicked him out to the fields.” When I still glared, however blearily, he then said, “He never beckoned me—did he ever beckon you?”

“Of course not!”

“He’s helping us then. Thank him for that.”

I sounded like a godawful prig when I announced, “I won’t have it.”

Hobart looked at me.

“Meaning, I won’t have that boy—selling himself for us.”

“I won’t have it either.” Noise indicated that Franz was returning. Hobart said, “Well, we’ve been in a fool’s paradise. I thought that maybe we could stick close to the towns. But we have to haul ourselves away. Blaze some trails. Keep that kid away from supporting us in the easiest way he knows how.”

“Easy,” I grunted.

When Franz returned, exhausted, we urged him to sleep. After we cooked the potatoes and ate them, saving the biggest for him, we shook him awake, fed him, and started off. A railroad line was to the north of us, as well as the sight of smokestacks and the sound of digging. We veered away. From here on in we would salvage our food again, by our own hands. We raided potato fields when we could and at times caught fish with our hands. Carrion on occasion. Once we ate snake, a big water job that that I planted my foot on its head and Hobart and Franz frantically pelted it with rocks.

After days walking through grasslands, the lands fell down into arid near-deserts. Days were now hot and breathless. We crossed streams, but many were low running and muddy. Mosquitoes made the Nazis seem like amateurs. At times the hot wind would whip up thunderheads, and one night we had to take the storm like cattle in the fields but we collected water in our aluminum cup. Once a bolt of lightning struck within a half mile of us and Hobart unashamedly yelped. The boy Franz came and stayed close to Hobart, who then unashamedly put his arm around him. “He hates lightning too,” Hobart told me in the morning.

Franz, as we strode along the hinterlands, avoiding all sounds of human activity, villages, and even the isolated farmer, seemed content, though he more than once offered to sneak into the villages that huddled around water resources. Hobart always assured him we were doing fine, and we were, except for some greenery. By, now we were dealing with a new problem: scurvy. Our gums were sore and bleeding. Franz’s legs swelled.

Added to this was a new worry: what would happen to us when we arrived in Turkey? And we believed with our hearts and minds that we would make it—the thought kept us going—but what then? Would officialdom, which we would have to face up to when we crossed the border, welcome us, three near ruffians without one shred of paper between any of us?—and

wearing Russian rags. Two Americans, and a displaced German boy. If we could reach Ankara we could find the American Embassy, but Ankara was in the center of the country. Of course, there may English and Americans scattered about the country, perhaps building bases or establishing outposts. Turkey had grown closer to the West, even directly cultivating powerful relationships with the United States as the USSR grew larger and fiercer in its persistent struggle to extend to the Mediterranean and establish a warm water port. But still, we could not assume any welcome being extended to us.

Then there was another worry. It was kind of an “invisible” feeling of being watched. Of course, we had dealt with such feelings since our moment of departure, but had shrugged or laughed them off as normal. After all, we were escaped convicts!—and the enemy to boot, Americans and Germans. But our understandable feelings of surveillance became concern, swiftly working up into fear when, one morning, we discovered human and horse prints on a ridge that we had camped below the night before. Hobart discovered the prints when he climbed on the ridge to take the bead on the day’s travels, which was another arid expanse. He reported what he saw. When Franz suggested that we had hidden well enough, or they didn’t want to bother us, we nodded our heads but privately didn’t believe it.

We could only go on. Rapidly, and looking all around us. We were now searching for Orenburg. We were hoping against hope that we could find some “green fields” to help us deal with scurvy. I could feel my legs swelling now. We felt our gums oozing. One night I dreamed of toothpaste.

One afternoon we saw people on horseback, way in the distance. We moved along, and they moved along with us. We finally stopped, early in the day, and to our relief, they moved on. But we knew they could have ridden on ahead to conceal their own movements. Day after day—maybe six days in all—the horses and their riders appeared, disappeared, reappeared. “What the hell do they want?” Hobart muttered. He had stumbled twice during the day, and I pretended not to notice, as did Franz. But Franz had stumbled too, and I had too. We put a cork on our fears and even Hobart did not find any humor in the situation. We camped on a dry streambed, and dug for water. We stayed alert all night, and the next, taking turns.

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The guy must have been pretty tired himself to let three weak and tired men overpower him when he crept into our camp. A blast of wind might have blown us all away. Sitting on him, muffling his shouts, we scrambled up some words to say to him, ask him who the hell he was and why had he been following us. Finally, we learned that he spoke some Turkish, which was mixed with Russian, and Franz, his tired mind concentrating, was able to pick out some words.

“I think he says he and others are looking for you—you,” he said, pointing to me.

Puzzled as hell, I looked at him. The man said to me, clearly, "Gulgar, nyet?"

It was like a blurry picture coming into focus. Not complete focus, but events in my past rushed in. "Nyet," I said, trying to sound puzzled.

Franz spoke, and Hobart translated, "That sounds like Gallagher, your name."

The man suddenly bounded from his seated position, grabbed Franz by what remained of his shirt, and with a knife grabbed from somewhere placed it at his throat. "Gulgar, Gulgar?" he violently spit into the boy's face, only moving the knife to gesture to me.

Franz's eyes locked on me. "Sorry," he said to me in Russian.

"Hold still," Hobart said to Franz. Calling up his years of dissembling, ducking, obfuscating, and getting along with people, he looked at me. "Well, I guess your secret is out."

Franz translated. The man jabbered with excitement. Franz, with his young throat still under threat, managed to get out a translation. "He is asking about 'gulgar ari.'" Franz looked at my face, which I held still. We were playing out the game second by second. Hobart was both relaxed and wary; Franz was staring at me pleadingly.

"Yes...gulgar ari," I said. "Me. Gulgar." I said this with as bored a tone as I could summon up.

"AHREE, AHREE!" he crowed. Still holding the kid by the throat, he said as I learned later, "nerelerde," which is Turkish for "where." I still figured out what he was asking. I stood up and flung my arm out back east, which could mean anything from the Urals to China. I shrugged as if saying "get off my back."

He spit out sentences which probably had a lot of curses in them. He stood up, dragging Franz with him and shouted at me; all I could do was shake my head which he took for refusal, rather than "I don't know what you are saying."

Clonk. His head came into contact with a river stone, wielded by Hobart. Never in a hurry, not even breaking a sweat, he had taken advantage of our visitor's excitement, picked up a rock and beaned him with it.

He sprawled out, his clothing and body so filthy that he ballooned up a cloud of smell. Franz, who had been dragged down with him, ably escaped and took the knife from him and Hobart said, "No!" as he prepared to drive it into his chest. I leaped forward and took it from him and we both ended up on the ground. When Franz detached himself from me and stood up, he was crying. Hobart stepped forward and took the boy in his arms and held onto him while he blubbered.

Hobart took two of our precious thongs—cut months ago in that prison camp which had certain attractions for me now—and tied the man’s hands and feet. “I’m going to look for his horse,” I said and scouted about as far as I dared. As evening came on, I thought I saw a spiral of smoke way in the distance. His friends? Would they be waiting for him?

I returned and said we needed to leave, now. Hobart didn’t argue. With Franz helping, we got our guest on his feet. Franz asked an obvious question: “Why don’t we kill him?”

“We may yet,” Hobart said, and we blundered off into the night. Despite everything we still tried to avoid violence.

We had to stop for a few hours and we would have heartily resented sharing our food with him, but we had none. We made use of his knife, cutting some kind of greenery at the edge of a stream that actually had a trickle of water sliding between its rocks. We tried to eat it and could not it was so bitter. I actually felt my stomach contract.

By the third day, our prisoner had calmed down. He seemed to be ready to die, teeth bared with hostility as we moved off and away, and then he too grew tired, and stumbled along with us. When we placed him into the shelter, and took turns watching him, he finally gestured into his loose, flowing, filthy pants. Within we found a packet of dried fish. “Hallelujah,” said Hobart. “Though I would prefer some broccoli. Used to turn up my nose at it.”

We had about three small bites apiece. We were starving, but the salt fish only made us thirstier. We sucked on pebbles. Our guest then looked at us, as though expecting a reward for his generosity. “Nerelerde...ari,” he said, accepting a cigarette. He made a face at the taste but something of his narcotic of the stuff dragged him into sleep.

I shrugged, as if saying, “maybe,” or “later” or perhaps “drop dead,” or its equivalent.

We moved on in the morning. We camped in the evening, but at least we found a stream with water. At this time of the year, the stream perhaps had only hours to go before drying up. We nearly slaked our thirst, and collected what we could for the next day.

“All right, Mr. Gulgar ari, start explaining,” my friend Hobart finally said, in English.

Franz scraped up the English I had been teaching him. “You are—Gulgar?”

“Oh God,” I could only groan. “Da. But. But.”

“Go on,” said Hobart.

“It begins back in the fall of 1945,” I began. “It commenced with my brother—”

“You’ve never spoken of family,” Hobart remarked.

“For this story, I do.” I related how my brother, a general in the Army Air Force at the time had been called to special duty in Yugoslavia, in summer of 1945. The war was over, obviously, but Europe was as peaceful as a disturbed anthill. He and others were detailed to make contact with a certain party to locate and fly out certain important scientists. The certain party demanded, for his assistance, a bag of gold. It was supplied: out of circulation coins. Perhaps altogether, about \$5000.

“Ah, the ari,” Hobart said. “Gold.”

“My brother, to make sure he had an ace in the hole, pretty literally, split the gold and buried half of it to make sure the party carried out his promise. Well, the interested party died, the half of the gold was retrieved and taken back to England. The other half stayed. Its location was never made known and stayed that way.”

“All this for—“

“There’s more. In 1947 I led a raid in Albania to rescue—some people—behind the lines. It went right. I returned to the field headquarters...to consult with the local chief—and two guys came in and started demanding I tell them where the gulgar ari was. How they learned about that half bag of gold...”

“Rumor. Grew with every mile it went.” Hobart turned to Franz, who was listening. He asked the boy if he had heard of “gulgar ari”—and not to lie to him, because he recognized the phrase.

The boy nodded. “It was great talk. It seemed to be a great—cave, filled with gold.”

When Hobart translated this, I actually chuckled. “Half a bag of out of circulation gold coins buried in some Yugoslavian hillside!—reminds me of a time when I was training some guys—back in the thirties. One of the guy’s mom had sent him a piece of fudge. Just a piece. Word got around the barracks and within an hour it turned into a five layer cake with chocolate frosting and cherries on top!”

Hobart chuckled too, and we both had to deal with our drooling mouths. Franz didn’t understand our talk, and asked some questions. Hobart said, “He makes a good point. People knowing about you—searching for you—is this good or bad?”

“God,” I groaned again. “Both good and bad. They—might want to keep me safe so I can talk—or torture me—and you two—to make me reveal the location. Hobart, we’d better split up—you go with Franz here and I’ll go on by myself.”

“Nix. We need you. You need us. Hell, we’ve got to be positive. I say we consider them our escorts.”

“What about that poor idiot?”

“You ever read fairy tales?”

“I didn’t read them when I was kid,” I said.

“Had a professor once who loved fairy—no, FOLK tales. He said they got all debased when they sweetened up for the kiddies. But his point is that in folk tales, the impoverished souls who made them up and told them didn’t have any other way to imagine themselves getting rich. In the US, you can get rich by inventing something, working yourself to death, or maybe marrying the boss’s daughter. But to the peasant, they could get rich only if they found a treasure, usually pointed out to them by a magical horse or bird or fox. These souls out in the ass end of the Soviet Union are the same way—despite the lessons they could learn from a good political officer.”

“Yeah, well, I wish I could point out a treasure somewhere....well, let’s figure out our prospects. We got through Orenburg. Our next town is Uralsk. Then, it’s just another thousand miles or so to the Caucasus mountains which we will probably cross into right at the beginning of winter. We are on the verge of scurvy, all of us. And armed bands looking for us, me, with the promise of finding a big treasure that doesn’t exist.”

“You forgot to mention we are out of food, too,” Hobart said, with nearly a wink.

Too tired to care about much, we all slept, and came awake with the jingling of bits.

We did not bother to restrain our prisoner. These were his friends, we had to suppose, and they clearly outnumbered us.

A man came into camp, bringing his smell of sweat and horses with him. He talked with our prisoner, while releasing him. They shouted at each other. Our prisoner talked with him, loudly, and then softly, but pointed at me, good ol’ Gulgur with his ari—all the way back in Yugoslavia.

The new arrival then suddenly leaped on our prisoner’s back and killed him.

There are times in which all you can do is stay calm. There is nothing left. Six men rode into camp, slowly, and surrounding us. More than once in my army career, I gambled like hell. And won. Could I do so again?

Slowly, I came to my feet and stood as tall and authoritatively as possible. By now, all the men were off their horses. Two men unfolded a leather trough and brought water to the horses from the surly little stream.

“Gentlemen,” I said loudly. “I can only welcome you. We need protection, and for this, I would like to hire you.”

Franz and Hobart scrambled together a translation. The men did not accept my blandishments, not that I expected them to. Their leader, if this is what he was, talked to Hobart. “He wants to know how you will pay them.”

“By offering one fourth of my treasure.” I paused while this was translated. “But—only man among you will get one fourth. Get it? Only one. He will be the finest protector.”

My legs were quivering as the offer was debated, with men shaking their fists, laughing, pointing, and then...agreeing. Hobart handled the negotiations. With astonishing swiftness, the deal was done with a handshake, and our two camps separated. Soon, the six men divided, three on one side, three on the other. We calmly set about making late breakfast, such as it was.

Hobart said, “Clever maneuver. But it’s pretty dark of you.”

“Exploiting honor among thieves? Yeah, I guess so.”

We moved out that day. Franz was stumbling a lot now as the scurvy attacked his younger system. He would stop after each stumble, breathe out, and get up, but every time he stumbled it would take longer and longer for him to get up. Finally, in the afternoon, we took him by the arms and shoulders and helped him along. He understood. We were scared that our “hired guns” would take this as some kind of trick. We moved slowly if purposefully.

Obviously, we could not relax, at any time, day or night. The one good thing in all this: they had food, and offered some to us to keep us going. Unfortunately, there was no greenery. We took turns watching at night; even the weakening Franz insisted on keeping watch. On the third night, the two camps were restive. They seemed to hurl insults at each other, and there was much rumbling talk. In the morning, we noted two riders missing.

We talked about this as we broke our camp. “Maybe they were killed. Or, maybe they decided it was a bad deal, and took off. I sure hope it’s the latter. I don’t want their blood on my conscience.”

I was silent, but I thought the same thing. Tempting men with a fabrication to get them to kill each other was not only violent, but plain lousy, though if immediately cutting our throats would have enriched them, they probably would have done so. Not exactly sick at heart, we marched on, as best we could with Franz growing weaker and weaker. Hobart asked if we should try to get him on one of the horses. Franz was adamant. No, he wanted nothing to do

with Russians, even though the characters we were dealing with probably did not claim such an identity.

For two more days we struggled on. The second night, there was a game going on in the camp. I figured it had to be as I listened to the whoops, the grunts, the spasms of disgust, which accompanied any game of chance, including the crap tournaments of red-blooded American dogfaces. The next morning, there was one less man. I wondered if the loser were murdered, or if he rode away. I suppose I will never know.

Now there were five. We pretended not to notice their attrition of men; two more men disappeared in the next three days. As always, we talked loudly and boldly, and even laughed, convincing them we were in charge. A plain war of nerves. I recalled playing that kind of war many times when I was in the field, but I had troops, guns, and ammunition to back me up. We only had a lie. A lie in itself is not violent. But it can breed violence.

The next night, none of us could stay awake. At these times you know that physical and emotional exhaustion are the strongest enemies in the world. I was trying to stay awake, but could not. I woke up when Franz, mumbling with swollen gums, that there had been a man in the camp.

I rolled up to see if Hobart were alive. He was, but sound asleep. I whispered to Franz through my own tender gums, "You must have been dreaming." He nodded, but in the morning, I observed there were boot prints in the camp. Though my eyes were burning and tired, I thought I saw that the heels were round and hard, unlike our boots and our company's boots, which were soft and worn.

Hobart listened to our report. "It may be a friend," he hazarded.

"A friend out here?"

For once, he didn't have a joke. "Where is that damned river?" he whispered. The Ural River was our next major landmark which would signal us to start swinging south.

Our slow progress enraged the two remaining men. They shouted at us, and taunted us, and Hobart thought he heard some words about killing us and taking our map. "Helluva lot of good that would do," he muttered.

"There he is," whispered Franz. "Our friend." We looked up and all around the horizon and saw nothing.

That night, more mumbling...and a seeming grunt of pain. One man remained.

In the afternoon, there was a different feeling in the air, carried by the wind. Franz, who was trying his best to walk with our help, feebly lifted his head and sniffed. It was pitiful to see his lips stretched out and watery blood oozed down his chin. "Water," he mumbled. After a moment, I realized he was not requesting or pleading...he was smelling.

"Maybe the river," Hobart said.

Franz broke from us and ran. We could only run after him, slowly, as our own scurried up legs barely let us move at a crawl. He was running with what was his last bit of strength. We won't know because the survivor of this gang, probably tired of everything, took aim, and fired his rifle. Shot in the back, Franz was smacked down, right on the edge of the river.

We stopped—and then ran again.

The shooter was stopping his horse, flying off and running...toward us.

He collared me in mid-stride, thrust an old pistol into my face and roared at Hobart...Hobart dug up some laughter and began pointing at him, his bleeding gums stretched over his teeth with a "ha, ha, ha!"

The man roared at him; Hobart kept laughing—and even dancing—the pistol was practically in my mouth, and, never in my life, even during the war, did I know I was one moment away from eternity. "Go on, go on!" laughed Hobart. At least, that it was he told me later. "Yes, more for us!"

He found and waved the map fragments at the man.

He was distracted. And then he too was dead, shot in the back. I really came to, staring at his body sprawling and moving, and then not moving.

Numbly, I picked up his pistol.

"Ahoy!" The naval salute came far away. A small figure, which became larger and larger as it strode up to us. We were standing like a couple of sticks. I could not even lift the rifle, clutched in my hand.

I heard a horse galloping up. One man who had probably ridden away voluntarily, had been following our tracks, waiting for the end. Like the idiots he had been riding with, he came flying off his horse, with a rifle, uncombed blond beard nearly flapping into his eyes.

The new arrival unslung a backpack. "Make a fire," he told us. "We'll have tea. But over there. Carrion birds bother me."

We had tea, with water boiled in a little tin pot and served in tiny china cups. Even Hobart was flabbergasted. His first words were, “We need to bury the boy.”

I said, “What do you want?”

“Relax. I have very little use for a half a bag of out of circulation gold coins.” His English was rather colloquial, though he was clearly Russian.

“So you must know I’m Gallagher,” I said.

“No names. Mine will not be known to you. And yes, let’s take care of that poor young man. I took pleasure dispatching his killer. Great pleasure.”

We took our time burying Franz. Our guide—that’s all I knew him as though I later learned his name and the connection he held with me--told us to take his jacket and his shoes, for we might need them. With sticks, we carved out a grave away from the river, where the ground was soft but not wet. We laid Franz there and covered him up gently. And I grieved—for him, and for all the victims of that madman, that Reich, that ideology, and the mad savage violence that understandably inflicted Soviet soldiers who had seen their countrymen slain by the millions. But that poor kid—he was ten when the war ended, and as a kid growing up in that hell of Nazi Germany, he would support his country and his leader, even though he didn’t contribute to the war effort except for collecting money and clothes for the relief efforts. His parents were probably supportive too, or pretended to, and raising a boy in a town that for years was beautiful and serene and then one day Soviet soldiers arrive and slay them and a ten year old boy gets hurled out into the world, and imprisoned, put to work, and taught to steal and take on other tasks to eat. He gets away and gets found by two escapees. He helps us, evokes feeling of protection, and sorrow for all other children bereft by war. And he ends up shot in the back somewhere in Georgia Russia, and buried in an unmarked grave. He has people to mourn him. I will never forget him.

We gave our prayers and our thanks, and once again I hoped there was a God to protect him, take him by the hand and lead him to a better place, without violence to mind, body, and heart.

Our guide then sat us down and shared his food. Not a lot. Not very good but it tasted like manna. We gnawed on the dried fish gratefully and bit into withered apples. I never had such a wonderful apple.

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Pres heard a feminine chuckle. “You must be writing about food,” she said gently. Pres put his hand to his chin and realized he had drooled in memory of that apple.

She was sitting near a protected place of the ledge their camp existed on. It was a sunny if frigid day. She had not been watching him—or so he thought—because she had lookout that afternoon, constantly scanning for “incoming,” both friendly and unfriendly.

Beyond her, cloud-wrapped mountains, looking as though Moses should be climbing them to greet Yahweh, filled his eyes. To Pres, she seemed like the mountains, imperturbable. “What’s for dinner?” he asked. In the last week his appetite had returned. He had been hungry for a long time, but eating had been a painful affair as his stomach struggled with any substance stronger than soup. His teeth and gums were nearly back to normal, after infusions of vitamins.

“Pide,” she said, naming a succulent dish of saucer-shaped bread, spread with oil, and finished with a fried egg. Her general man around the camp, an older man called Deniz, was on a shopping expedition in the village of Reisaya, a day’s trek back and forth. Every two weeks a special meal was served to the camp’s inhabitants; it was something to look forward to, and something to remember.

“Grr,” he growled, with appreciation. He continued writing, and she continued with her knitting. She was good at it, but Pres knew she knitted and unraveled and knitted the same skein of yarn over and over, to keep her hands busy—possibly her emotions? Every three minutes, she would raise her field glasses to her eyes, search the vistas before them and behind them. Pres had not asked for what; all he knew was that she was on surveillance duty on the border between Turkey and the USSR...but he also knew that Turkey and the USSR were in a blunt delicate dance as Turkey carefully cleaved to the west, full well knowing that such a move brought obligations that the east would resent... He turned to his writing, crowding every word he could onto precious pages of paper, recording his journey, and knowing his hunger was growing not only for food, but for her.

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No Wind So Bitter, continued:

For three days Hobart, our nameless guide, and I had a sort of holiday. We collected water, bathed, scrubbed, bathed again while our guide shook our clothes over the fire, laughing when the lice fell in and popped. “Make ‘em die hard,” Hobart said. We then beat our clothes and scrubbed them again. Our guide gave us haircuts and we trimmed our beards. He produced vitamins from his stores, and we automatically began to feel better, though we were far from well. We repaired our shoes with pieces of leather he supplied. We then started out on another leg of the journey. Not the last, but another one. As always, we really didn’t know where we would finally stop. If our guide knew, he didn’t say, which was perhaps safer for all of us. We also did not pose two questions we both desired and feared the answers to: How he had found us? And, who had sent him to find us?

We still had over three hundred miles to go, and the Ural River was our map. We rejoiced in having sure direction, worried that we would be too obvious to watching eyes, and we knew there would be fishing or farming villages along the way. From a distance, we could be taken I guess for holiday takers, enjoying a pleasant hike along the river. Up close, you could see our thin faces, worn out clothing, and patched shoes—even our guide was beginning to resemble us after three weeks. We walked, and walked, and walked, and ironically, Hobart and I had greater endurance than our friend, though he stayed up with pretty well. We built camps in secluded places, and kept watch. Our guide, after three days, told us over the morning fire that we were stay in camp, and wait for him. He left, and after several bad hours, he returned, with fresh fish and beets, which we made into a stew.

“Stolen or paid for?” I asked him. By now, he was sharing our sweetgrass tobacco, and after taking a deep puff and then coughing, he assured us all was paid for.

Within four days we finally entered into the delta where the Ural River entered the Caspian Sea. “Well, hallelujah,” said our guide. “Guys,” he said, using a real Americanism, “I say we find a boat.”

“A boat?” Hobart demanded.

“Sailing is faster. We will sail south and disembark at Derbend, a city down the western side of the Caspian Sea.”

By now I was feeling well enough to be suspicious. The easier he was making things for us, the more suspicious we both grew, but I bested Hobart in this by a country mile.

Our guide took off the next morning. Hobart and I hadn’t talked too much about him because he was with us, constantly, and perhaps we felt ungrateful to repay his help with slitted eyes and doubled up fists, even though this was an emotional condition, not physical.

“Pack up and follow me,” he then said, appearing six hours later, almost magically out of the shrubbery. We followed him into the dusk, the twilight, and then into the night until we came to a hut, with a beached fishing boat, small and trim and silver with age and wear. We camped well beyond the hut and in the morning, before dawn, we waited for instruction.

“Confident stride,” said our guide. “Our host is doubtful enough without thinking he is transporting convicts.” We straightened our shoulders, put on our most neutral faces, and confidently came up to a hut and a man who waited for us. We climbed into his shallow-bottomed boat, settled down, and he eased our transportation out into the tributary that would take us to the sea. Three days later, we arrived at the Caspian, the largest inland sea in the world, and situated between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, a swirl of the east and the west, and in some ways the north and the south. By now I was able to thank our boatman, who was well

paid, and happy to see us on our way. By the next day, our able guide arranged for transportation on a fishing boat.

We were on the boat for eight days. I look back at those being the best eight days, as well as the worst eight days in my life. Worst because Hobart and I both felt trapped on that boat. Except for fishing excursions on a wonderful lake of my childhood that everybody kid should have, I never was much of a sailor, and recalled how my favorite fishing was from the pier in a nearby village. In a wooden craft, surrounded with millions of gallons of water did not make me feel safe, and when other fishing smacks came near I debated jumping over the side—to swim to the shore which was nearby, but not always safe as the coast alternated between pleasant beaches and then cliffs and rocks. As the southernmost point of the country, and near the borders, Soviet craft bobbed about on the lake, and twice the captain was hailed, pulled over, and his papers examined. We made ourselves busy with nets, and tried to look calm as if this were an old story to us.

I was also struck by the contrast of the bright warm days with the frozen hell of Siberia. I was struck with an enormity of Russia, or the USSR, and how could any country hold together so many different lands into one proud Communist force? I will tell you, they can't. This Soviet Republic will never hold.

Our scurvy receded as we gobbled as many vegetables as we could find, barter, buy. The Turkish cigarettes were malodorous but fine, so fine! And September, after the heat of summer and before the cold of the winter, was a glorious time to be on the water. The sky was blue, the waters bluer; the wind just enough to keep us cool, and move the craft along. Life happened on the boat, from squatting on a bucket, to cooking morning fish, to buying from others as skiffs routinely came out to sell to the fishermen. We helped with the catch as best we could, and lay in the boat at night and gazed at the stars, remembering the same stars shone down over the prisoners we left behind...as well as our families. The only thing we did not do is talk very much. We thought it a courtesy to our host who would not be privy to us talking about things he probably did not want to know. We wondered—of course, how we wondered, why he did not tell us anything. We were reluctant to ask, knowing, sensing that his secrecy was important. Important for what..?

One lazy afternoon, when the sea was still and the boat as still, Hobart and I dozed in the warmth...Hobart said, "My friend, when we re-enter the world, what shall we do?"

A question we had touched on before; now it really needed discussing as we came closer to the border of Turkey. Once a desired destination, now it seemed fearful.

"Uhhh..." I said, reality intruding into this Caspian idyll. "I guess...I guess...find the nearest American embassy. Throw ourselves on their mercy."

“And then what? Taking up our lives again won’t easy. On anybody.”

He gazed over the waves to a distant shore. I understood. He surely feared he had been gone so long, the wife would have remarried, or perhaps...died. I thought about my own family. I too had a wife back home. What had she done in the wake of my disappearance? What had she told our children? What was my future...if my boss had died leaving no information about my mission, or perhaps would deny the mission I had set out on, months and months ago.

Hobart spoke. “So much time. So much sadness. Could I fit into a home anymore?”

Too much time, too much violence, too much fear.

We both examined the shore, and I know we both wondered that perhaps we should stay in Turkey...if we got to Turkey. There was still a long way to go.

Our guide never talked to us about things, one way or another. He talked with our fishermen; sang at times, and lay in the prow of the boat, smoking, idling...and paying when necessary. He never spoke to us about repaying him, or why he was helping us or what our next step would be, or should be. He seemed to be taking complete pleasure in anything from greasy fish soup to the glory of a sunrise and sunset over the sea.

On the ninth day of our idyll, our host summoned our help. The day was calm and when we were shown oars, we locked them in, and started pulling against the heaving water. We pressed west, and several hours later the city of Derbend appeared on the coast, white and calm against the dark backdrop of the Caucasus mountains. And these were real, not the mountains we had determined to reach since April.

Derbend, Russia’s southernmost city, was a gate way to the Caucasus. Alexander had trekked through, once in his quest to conquer the world. I used to admire Alexander, but my feelings had changed, although his strategies were brilliant. Our guide helped our history; Derbend had been a city under various dynasties of the Persians; it had been in Russian hands no less than three times over the centuries, until finally the Ottomans ceded the lands west of the Caspian to Russian in 1836. Russian it had remained, though the city, portions of which were neatly gridded, and other portions were a coil of lanes and streets, looked romantically Arabian Nights with the minarets of mosques.

We came ashore at a stone pier. In the usual noise and coming and going of a port city, nobody took much notice of us, particularly since one could see, in a mere five minutes, tall blond Russians, short, dark wiry Arab men; the sandy haired nondescript; women in dark headdresses walked by women who were bareheaded. I mainly eyed great heaps of harvested vegetables flanked by cuts of meat.

There we were, still thin but tanned and neatly bearded, and helping with the catch; many hands came out and bought it, and gave coins and other specie to our hosts. Though part of the USSR, fringe cities were overlooked for their capitalistic practices, though rebuked by lazy commissars. On the pier, our host heated a stone over a brazier, slung fish on it, salted them and ate to our health. We ate to his. Our guide bought brandy for us; cheap because Derbend was the chief production center of the glorious liquid. As the afternoon advanced, we ate with our hands, drank brandy from a bag, and while it seared my throat it spun my thoughts in happy circles. Finally, evening advanced and a chill fell, and our guide said, "Come on, gentlemen. Let's get back on our feet."

The ship's captain, amazingly, thanked us. We shook his hand and tried to tell him how grateful we were. He waved it off, but happily accepted another gold coin from our guide.

We walked—and walked, and walked, seeking to get out of Derbend. Hobart and I once more felt like rubes off the turnip truck as we gawped at so many people; motorcars; bicycles; stores; shops, police officers; color, smell, sounds and marveled all this was going while we trudged the miles and miles from Siberia...and all this would be going when we began our final leg into the Caucasus. I recall that we passed by an Asian quarter and the smell of Chinese food nearly knocked me down. Our guide had left us to buy shoes and clothes for us, and when he returned he bought bowls for us and we consumed fried rice and spicy chicken, knowing no food anywhere could be as good, and I still think of fondly even though it gave me some violent gas. He then gave us some food and canteens. We filled them at the nearest tap. And then we left. As Derbend receded, the Caucasus ranges grew bigger, and nearer, but there were many miles to go.

And then what? I was growing grimmer and grimmer as our final days of escape and the first day of freedom came nearer.

We soon veered off the fairly busy road and went among the trees. We found an area secluded by rocks, and we prepared to get a night's sleep. I felt like a kid going to school and facing a test that he is pretty sure he is going to fail. He keeps on going because has to go to school, has to take the test. Has to take the consequences.

We made a fire that night just long enough for our guide to trace the route for us on paper. The map was largely traced by the names of villages to search for. The Caucasus is threaded with passes, some safer than others, and to avoid capture—we could still be snatched, make no mistake, said our guide—we were directed to a more northern route. The snow might be flying by the time we made those passes. We would have to hurry as October was ten days away.

A few more sips of brandy put us into a pleasant sleep. Our guide's promise to wait up and watch was held as we slept peacefully. He then left us in the morning, after a round of handshaking. He also gave us a gold coin, a British coin, saying it was for good luck.

We did not feel abandoned. But we felt sad, as sad as we did when we lost Franz. We were left puzzled as to who the hell he was. And who was paying him to save our hides.

"It might be something for safe passage," I said. I curled my hands around it and looked at Hobart. "I wonder if this is part of the treasure. You know, gulgar ari. As I said, it was out of circulation gold coins."

"Perhaps. This has been a remarkable adventure. No reason not to make it more remarkable." He then said, "You know, I wonder...if that fellow...was the one who helped us at the camp."

"Helped us how?"

I came clean. "Somebody gave my ass a boost that wonderful terrible night of escape. Maybe it was him."

"Why would he help us? Then...and then later..."

There was no answer. I hoped someday I would find my answer.

We set about making breakfast but I was assailed with weariness and sadness. The last ten days had been lively with new sights, regular food, sightseeing, at times a sense that all had to be well, how could it not? Now we were back on foot, alone, unsure of our food supply, and facing what might be the worst leg of our entire trek. At least we were rested, and strengthened by food and vitamins but we were far from being completely fit.

"Let's get going," Hobart said.

"How about a joke?" I requested.

He measured the mountains with his eyes. "Well, a fellow fell off a tall building. As he was going down, people at the windows heard him say, 'So far, so good.'"

I laughed, but inside I shuddered, deeply and violently.

**

It would be useless to describe every step of our journey, even if I could. For four weeks we followed our guide's directions, which included taking the right fork of the trail we found where we expected to find it. There was a trail, but that did not make the going easy.

On the opposite shore of one small lake we trailed by we encountered a wonderful sight: a stone hut, covered with a wattles. It was a shelter. We snatched up any stick we could find and started a fire. We cooked the last of our food, and in the light, studied the map, to see that we

had reached a marked spot. We took hope with our guide's words of being able to find villages and hamlets tucked into mountain range, always hospitable. We walked and climbed for two more days before we finally saw a hamlet. We actually finger combed our hair and our beards, and walked into the village, politely but deliberately.

Two women came out of their shelters. We stopped and bowed. Our desperation was on our faces; they beckoned us to sit down on stone benches, and brought warm goat milk to us in pottery cups. They offered flat bread and bits of meat. We ate, thanked them and then gestured toward the sheds...could we clean them?

The shed had never been so clean, I might add! For our labor they fed us again...and brought out a woven blanket. Gray and thick and warm. While we exclaimed over it, an old woman came out and picked up our bags and weighed them. She talked to the two other women, and clapped her thin hands. The two young women nodded to her, returned to their homes, and came out with flat bread and slabs of cheese and offered them to us. The old woman then demanded more. After an hour, we were presented with a portion of a sheep.

Hobart grinned. "She wasn't checking if we stole anything; she was checking our food stores."

I wanted to offer the gold coin for her generosity, but Hobart put his hand on my arm. "It is their way," he said, and bowed to the women. So did I.

That sheep got us through the next ten days. We rationed it with care, but we were reduced to one meal a day as we threaded passes, climbed peaks, made perilous descents. We became lost and encountered the face of a cliff. We had twisted our thongs around the rope our guide had supplied, and we scrambled up, with toes and fingers clinging to any spot we could find. At the top, crouched over a fire, we studied the map for a landmark and then gave up. In the morning, gnawing on the last of the sheep, we resignedly walked on, lost and knowing it.

We came around a thrust of rock and came face to face with a dog. The wind had pushed our smell away so the canine, an enormous shaggy character, was about as surprised as we were. He backed up and barked, and its bark banged up the hill side...and produced an elderly face looking out of a sliver of an opening higher up on a tiny ledge.

He gestured for us to climb up by a series of equally tiny ledges. Any surprise was perhaps tucked into the deep creases of his face, which was surrounded by a turban-like headdress. His eyes were brilliant and actually danced as he motioned us in, holding the rug-door aside. We passed between two lintels of wood and stone and stepped into a spacious interior, lighted with a dung fire. We unashamedly gathered over it, warming our hands.

The old man offered us water. While we grew warm, he too lifted our sack, and then left. We stayed where we were and realized that the dwelling we were in, which had been built into and

under a ledge, was stuffed with dried grass. The smell of sheep was strong. "Must be a winter camp," Hobart muttered. We heard some bellowing, and the old man reappeared, with a small sheep under his arm. He dispatched it with a knife, and laid it down on a stone with channels. Its blood ran out into vessels. By now, we were hypnotized by the sudden coming of food. The old man swiftly cut up the sheep, and tossed bits of the offal to the dog as he prepared the carcass. He then roasted it for us, smiling as we stared and rubbed our mouths. While the carcass cooked over the fire, he made bread.

We politely accepted the food...but not after praying over it, thanking the sheep for its sacrifice. We then fell on it like the starving men we were. He ate but smiled and nodded and then politely accepted our help as he cleaned up after the meal, and carried a large pot of water outside. We somehow carried it down, scrubbed it out with our hands, and filled it with snow and struggled back up.

How I slept that night. The cave was warm, almost too warm for two men who had clung to each other at night for body warmth, or hid from the wind behind ledges or piles of heaped up snow. When we awoke in the morning, our host was stirring some kind of soup for us, into which he threw gobs of fat from the sheep. While we ate, he studied our crude map. When the sun fully shone in the mid-morning, he took us past the sheep pens, over a hill, down a ridge, and pointed out our trail.

We started out again, picking up one foot and putting it down, one after another.

Our trail and travels made us forget that we were ever on flat land. It was a rising, falling undulating nightmare of beauty and terror. Clouds pulled and tore around the peaks; the sky glittered cold and calculating, and all round us, nature, red in tooth and claw, watched us, two stick figures grasping, crawling, gasping, and somehow getting up every morning to continue. Hobart was making me fearful. Ten years my senior, his strength was being demanded from wells that surely ran dry a long time ago. His eyes were sunk on his face, and his lips were bleeding.

Every night, when we made one more camp, and thanked God we had survived one more day, we always avoided talking about the fear of ending this journey. It had to end. It was going to end, sooner, rather than later. Then what? Then what? I had nothing really to answer for—nothing that couldn't be answered, with people's help, but family and friends may not understand why I left. Why I took off.

We stopped more frequently. I made a point of hiding our division of food to give him more. "I will make it," he kept assuring me. "After all this, how can I not?"

“Of course,” I said, cheerfully. But one night, when the cold gripped down on us, and we huddled together for warmth, he whispered to me, “I think I found the purpose God has for me. I am going to help you make it to safety.”

“We’ll help each other,” I assured him.

I was not holding onto him as tightly as he could have when his feet slid over loose rocks, and his haversack caused him to lose his balance and he pitched over the tiny ledge of our trail.

I questioned his belief in God the night he died. The long fall, the hours of dying.

I questioned my own, however much I had. I still question it, but if there is a God, he or she is expressed through the kindness of the people who helped us. Perhaps there was God in our friendship, our willingness to help each other.

I set about as I could to give his body a decent putting away. I took his haversack and when I climbed back to trail, and shouldering my own, went on my way. In mid-morning I built a fire and ate his portions of sheep, knowing it might give me the strength to keep going a few more days.

I studied the photograph of his wife and child. The girl, whose name was simply “Mary” was three and his wife, Judith, looked pretty and calm on that long ago day when the picture was taken. I looked on the back. There was printing, in ink. Hardly legible. “Died, house fire, February 9, 1933.” Suddenly, if dully, I understood his words about them for truly the first time: they were waiting for him. God, how I hoped they were. Truly, God, I whispered, I hope they are.

If you think I didn’t care to live anymore, after losing my best friend, whose memory I will forever honor, and being stuck alone in seemingly trackless mountains in pretty much enemy territory, you are wrong. If anything I wanted to live now, more than ever. I had to honor this guy. I had to tell the world how great he was. How he had helped me. So I got started.

I did not know when I crossed the border into Turkey. Morning or afternoon, nothing made too much sense. I had been without food for five days, maybe more.

I finally sat down. I could not get up. I finally came to that moment. I lost hope.

**

Pres lay on the ground, wondering if cold, hunger, or exhaustion would kill him, and thinking how pleasant a long sleep would be, without feeling, worry, hunger, and never to wake again. What problems it would solve. Since Hobart was no longer around to prod, nudge, encourage...yes, he could...

Then his eyes slitted open at a noise, and he watched two pairs of boots approaching him.

She rose up before him, sideways, head over heels, upside down. He couldn't rotate his eyes to make her look right. But she was a hallucination...but her hand took his, and it was warm.

He should kill her for blocking his way. But he was too tired. He had been walking for eight months, alone for the last few weeks. He tried to speak and only a gasp came out.

She took over. "We are your friends."

We. Who else. Somehow, he righted himself in a sitting position.

She gave him tea and some kind of cookie. He wanted a smoke. The woman rolled tobacco for him and lighted it. With a real match. He drifted off and came to between puffs.

"Come with us." She and another figure led the way down a rock slope. Pres walked by himself though he knew he needed help, and the woman's shoulder came up against him, and her arm clasped his own. "The camp is ahead." He became aware that she was limping; she lurched slightly against him.

The wind grew warmer. They passed through a tiny village, clinging to the hillside like a lizard on a wall. People looked at him. They sat down for a few minutes, and a woman put a bowl of gruel in his hands. He smiled at them, said thanks in his own language, and drank. A man came up with a real cigarette. Machine rolled. It smelled sweet. She lighted his cigarette with a burning sliver of wood. He smoked. "Come on," she said and once more helped him down the trail. Pres walked along. The bit of food was waking him up. Words were making sense again. He wasn't sure he wanted them to.

They came to a tent. They entered. A single light was burning. He was seated and given a bowl of something to drink.

"How do feel?"

"Quite well," he lied.

She gently fed him bits of meat. He fought nausea and made himself chew and swallow. He tried to ask questions, but found smoking more pleasant.

"Here, sleep."

Pres' body turned into liquid and flowed onto the pallet laid on the floor.

**

No Wind So Bitter, continued

I had been found. By a women and two men. They warmed me up with strong tea. They had to hold it up to my mouth.

We were on foot for two more days. They could not have carried me over the trails we followed, which were needle thin paths over crests, down slippery hills, and around crags of stone. So I walked.

I ate and slept obediently. I managed to learn that the two men who found me and made me come with them were named Sergei and Suleyman. But I still could not get back the hope that kept me going over the miles, over the months. I had read once about how concentration and death and work camp survivors kept themselves alive by hope. When help finally arrived, and they were released, many of them were joyful...and fell into profound depression and sorrow that sometimes carried them to taking their own lives, away days, months, even years after rescue. I knew the feeling.

They brought me to a camp. It was on a plateau, and set up against a huddle of rocks. The camp seemed a fairly permanent one. Ground cover tarpaulins, hung on peeled logs, formed a shelter, and beyond was a deep indentation under a ledge. Other tarpaulins, laced into the hillside, formed more shelters. There were pots for water, neatly lined up, a pile of wood, and people. Relaxed, but vigilant. The women came to their feet when we came in; I have no doubts their rifles had been ready for quite some time as we defiantly crunched on sticks and rattled pebbles in our approach. We were situated on a ledge that was swallowed up in shadow in the afternoon by a neighboring peak. Down below our ledge was an enormous undulating stretch of white rock, so white it seemed like snow and was blinding in the noonday sun.

There was food ready, meat in a pot. But I had no appetite, and obeyed the woman when she insisted on my being served tiny bites only. I was nearly shaking for a smoke. They gave me one. I blissfully rolled the smoke over my tongue and blew it out. I think I was already asleep, even as I was asking questions about who they were, and where I was, and how far away was Turkey, and by the way, I said, I am very grateful...

In late 1950, a face, browned by sun and wind, smiled with precious teeth, which she had treasured amidst their hard living. Treasured because she thought them her last vestige of beauty. She grinned as Pres read his last words about his journey, written in pencil and crowded onto the precious piece of paper.

“That was nice,” she said.

“God, it is,” said Pres, surprised at himself and at tears rising in his eyes. That was nothing new; he found himself weeping more than once as he traced out his and Hobart’s journey. He had always been better at mathematics than at writing, but he was learning that when you really feel passionate about your subject, writing is easy...about terrible times, wonderful times, times that tried those proverbial souls...times that told you who you were, and what you valued.

“You said your mother was a journalist. You inherited her skills.”

“Maybe not all her skills,” Pres said. “Now my brother Jeff—he wanted to write.”

“I heard a few things about Jeff.” In the light of the fire, which burned low but steadily, Pres Gallagher described his youngest brother...and continued falling in love with the woman who had come out to meet him in November, as the first rotten bite of winter chewed violently into the mountain range which he knew he was not gonna survive...he was too old, too wasted, too exhausted, and too without hope or desire even to feel hope.

**

Several weeks earlier, Pres had awakened to hear a woman’s voice saying, “You have to be sick before getting better. Please, do not fight this.” To his annoyance, she was holding a bowl to his lips. Pres raised an eyelid to see her; her face was in the dark. Hands propped him up so he could drink something that tasted like poison and did it quickly to get it over with. This happened more than once.

As he rose slowly out of the abyss, he found himself back on waters. He was floating on a tired river that rolled his boat slowly along. What the hell, it felt better than walking. Dark water eased on his sides, and surged under him. At times he wanted to bring the boat to shore, but the shore was dangerous. He let it carry him on, and on, and on...until one day he awoke, feeling oddly warm. When he opened his eyes, bright blue sunlight struck his eyes like a knife.

He eased his eyelids up and down until he could bear the sky and sun. He saw a woman sitting on a spur of rock. A ledge with pines rose over her.

Pres withdrew his eyes from the mountains, down the peak that towered to the west of the camp, and to the woman. She was much better to look at. She was reading. The air was sharp with cold, but they were in a hollow, filled with afternoon sun, glowing with fragile warmth. It made him feel, for a moment, like waking up and living.

“Mam?” he croaked.

She shut her book. He struggled up. “Did I fall asleep out here?” It was a stupid first question.

She smiled. “You have been asleep for two weeks,” she said. “We bring you out here for the sun.”

“Sure, two weeks,” he said.

“With the help of certain drugs,” she said.

He made a face at the memory. Bitterer than the waters of the Styx, the riverway to death.

“We fed you as we could...cleaned you up as we could. Now you are awake, and I think you want to stay awake. You have questions.” Her English, quite precise, was accented.

“Who is...we?”

She called “Suleyman! Sergei!” Both men appeared after a few minutes, smiling at Pres, smiling at her.

“Would you like for them to walk you around?”

“Yes.” Pres knew where he wanted to go, too. They helped him out of the hollow, over a rocky trail to a rock terrace, guarded by pines. Moving by will power alone—he could not quite feel his feet—they guided him to a hut on the edge of the ledge they were on; a wooden board with a hole was over a crevice. After he finished, they dashed some water down the crevice.

He was exhausted. They helped him into an earth colored tent. The woman appeared in the tent, and she and the two men talked. They left. He found a robe and pulled it on and shuffled his feet into slippers. He was then offered mutton stew. He ate and drank some tea and then lay down on blankets and was covered up by more blankets...He slid down into sleep and a dream visited. He was walking, and walking, and people came abreast with him, and sometimes they talked with him. He would ask them about Betty and the kids; the answers were at times violent. He and Joe met each other and dived naked into an ice cold pond and when they emerged, Jeff was with them. “Let’s have some fun,” Jeff said with his guileless grin, and they chopped down a tree...inside the tree was the grail. Joe grabbed it before Pres could. “Don’t worry, it’s full of lice,” Joe told Jeff before they started running, and he ran after them, trying to get the grail away from Joe...

Pres woke up for real the next morning—at least, he figured it was the next morning. He felt like hell, but he felt normal, at least more normal. He became aware that some old tapestries were hung around and covered the floor. He took this all in, but slowly...he was aware that the light seemed to change before the tent’s opening was pushed aside and a woman—the woman-looked in. “How are you feeling this morning?” she asked.

“Well enough,” Pres said. “What time is it?”

“You mean, what day is it—and actually, what month.” She left and then returned with a carafe of coffee. It was a beautiful piece of silver, but she poured the coffee into a clay cup, which he had to take with both hands. He drank and said, “I take it I’ve been asleep for a while.”

She only smiled. “About two weeks.”

“What?—oh, yes, you said that yesterday.” Today, it was easy to believe.

"You were hysterical with exhaustion. We have seen it before. A long sleep helps."

"Almost permanent," Pres murmured.

"Bathe, and I will shave you and then you will feel better."

His hand came into contact with his beard. It had been clipped closely but a lot of brush was left over. He also ran his hands over his thin body. His ribs and pelvic bones stuck out.

Another woman brought in a steaming bowl of water and set it on a leather stool. She gave him a chip of soap. Good enough. He soaped down with his hands, and then scrubbed himself with the brush he found in the basin. He then wiped himself with the hot water. He sniffed the attar of roses. He put the robe and slippers back on his tingling body.

She returned with a straightedge razor. "I can shave myself," he protested.

"No. You are still shaky."

Yeah, he was. She removed the bowl of water, and he sat down in a leather stool. He wet his face down, and she produced a thin lather from the chip of soap. She spread it over his face. The touch of a female hand was discomfiting, wonderful and he let it go on as long as it could...

Finally, "I will draw blood."

He felt his face. "Do you have a mirror?" She handed him one set in a silver frame. Pres studied himself, dispassionately. "Same eyes, same nose...same mouth. The hair... is different." Still thick, it had gone gray. It should be stark white, he thought.

"Are you the same?" asked the woman.

"I don't know."

She told him to stay where he was. He obeyed, knowing she was thinking far more clearly than he was, though he realized that his thoughts were going together like they should.

He got back into his bed. Through the gaps in the drapes, he could see people passing back and forth in the sunlight. The woman returned with a bowl of soup and some tea. He sat up. "Not drugged, unless you wish it to be," she said. He shook his head. Eating took a lot of his strength and he lay down for a nap that lasted for hours. He had another dream, with Joe, but this time, no grail, no lice...no Jeff.

He had outshot Joe on a basketball court. The basketball then turned into a football which he threw to Joe and Joe ran with it and then came back him, limping. "No harm, no foul," he said,

handing Pres a baby...which he didn't recognize. But he sat down and held it, knowing his sporting days were over.

The next morning, the frigid morning was sunny but clouds were massing like enemy forces. Pres concealed his disappointment when he did not see the woman. He asked the man called Suleyman. "Where am I?—meaning, whose camp and whose hospitality am I enjoying? And...why?"

Suleyman did not quite comprehend Pres's English, but he understood enough to seat Pres on a leather folding chair and then find the woman. She was not the only woman in camp; he learned that Suleyman and Sergei had wives. The woman he wanted to see approached Pres regally, confidently.

But she had questions and they were blunt. "What happened to his partner?" "How did you hide the body?" "Did you leave anything anywhere?" Pres answered calmly, knowing she was concerned about her camp's security. Finally she asked, "Who was he—the man you were with?"

Pres answered, "His name was John Hobart. He was a prisoner in Siberia for thirteen years. He was the finest friend and man I ever knew." He then nearly asked, "Did you send that man out to help us?" He didn't.

Then she said "What would you like to ask me?"

"What you consider safe."

She considered his question. "Ask me...who I am."

Finally, "Lyudmila?"

"Yes."

"Am I in Albania...?"

"That was three years ago. We are in Turkey."

He finally framed his next question. "Who have you told about me?"

"We were waiting for you to tell us."

"Bless you," Pres whispered. "You're a smart woman, Lyudmila."

“I am Ilka again. But call me what you wish.” Her direct manner then faltered. “We are so happy to have you here.”

“Where is here—exactly, I mean?”

“A high ledge in the Caucasus. In terms of miles, we are 600 miles east of Ankara. As the crow flies, as the expression declares.”

“Why are you here?”

“We monitor the Soviet Union for the west. From the peak over there, we have been observe any Soviet activity. We intercept broadcasts.”

He didn’t ask for whom, but Turkey, nominally western, had an enormous, difficult neighbor, and collecting reports about its border activities would be helpful for NATO. But he asked: “Why am I here?”

“We have been waiting for you. We are glad you here. Hush,” she then said to his inevitable questions. He knew an order and better, he knew when to obey one.

Ilka then walked about with certain lightness in her step—hard to do since her left leg was wooden and clumsy, though made by an expert craftsman. In her current work, there were not many ways to measure success, but finding and bringing Preston Gallagher to safety was one way. Halide, Suleyman’s wife, noticed this and told Makbule, Sergei’s wife, and they both smiled.

**

Pres remained a witness of camp life, not a participant. But his clearing brain observed a great deal. Food was cooked in a clay oven rather than an open fire. A lot of food came from tinned vegetables, and fresh mutton came from a flock of sheep in a far pasture, kept by Makbule’s younger brother. On occasion a deer was fetched in, shot with a silent arrow. The five tents, though colorful inside, were dirt colored. They used oil lamps, but cautiously to ration the fuel. Coffee was precious, tea more plentiful. There was a battery-operated radio but to be used only in emergencies. A courier brought reports in, and took reports out. Both the men and the women, including Ilka, pitched in with camp life, from fetching wood and water, to cooking, to policing the area, and to keeping watch at night. Watch was kept during the day as well; every six hours during the daylight hour somebody was trudging up or trudging down an observation point on the peak to the east, which, Pres finally learned by direct observation, provided a nearly unimpeded view of three passes which carried the viewer’s eyes, with the help of field glasses, to the blue smudge of the Caspian.

Pres observed all these things as he sat in the sun and rested. Or, he sometimes told himself, gave into paralysis--not physical, but emotional.

The five people seemed to take little notice of him beyond seeing to his needs--which suited Pres just fine. He tipped between dreaming of being his old self with his old life...and being somebody different with a different life. But a different what..? He also tipped between feelings of joy—the pleasure of hunger that he knew would be satisfied, the pleasure of watching clouds, the pleasure of sleeping deeply at night without a care...like his childhood, eons ago. Then joy was replaced with a deep sadness. Sadness for his wife and children. Sadness at not keeping his vow, one he made to Max years earlier, at Bryncote: he would not abandon his family, as he had accused his father of doing. And he had. Duty was involved, enormous distances, and perilous situations, but abandonment could not be sidestepped.

And then there was Joe. He sure as hell bested him this time. Escaped from prison and walked nearly three thousand miles!—and was found by Joe's...no, that was cruel.

God, why couldn't he leave Joe behind? Even now?

"What are you thinking about?"—so said Ilka, suddenly, if kindly, one afternoon. They were seated in one of the areas in the camp safe from the winds.

Joe vanished...though not quite. "Nothing of importance."

"Are you all right?" This was not a casual inquiry.

"I don't think so, yet," was his answer. "Maybe I will never be all right."

"Snakes shed their skins to get rid of parasites..."

"Madam," Pres said with a slight grin, "what does that mean?"

"I've shed my skin. More than once. Maybe you need to do so too."

The more Pres thought of her words the more he sensed the truth in them. Parasites--creatures exploiting another creature, without benefit. But was he a victim of parasites...or was he the parasite? In any case, it was time he quit being a parasite here, with these people. A few days later, Pres got to his feet one morning, stayed on them, and volunteered for chores. That afternoon, he fetched firewood from stores down the ledge, and containers of water from the spring some three hundred yards away from the camp. The water was gathered by hanging a bucket at a treacherous angle over a ledge to gather what water splashed into the container. It was pretty miserable business but how easy, how pleasurable it was, just fetching water. He could do this the rest of his life. And that was all right, he thought. He was going to be all right here. Here and now. He went about whistling.

But Ilka was not fooled. She finally one day told him, more or less in passing, that they had received a message by courier that he and his friend were struggling through and over the

Caucasus. They were to watch out for them and bring them to safety. Pres listened but didn't inquire about the source: their guide. But who was behind the guy, who was paying him and why? Oh, did it even matter, Pres thought. And yes, he told himself in the middle of a sleepless night, it did. The next day he whistled all the harder. But the whistling circled over a grim face, a gritted jaw, hooded eyes.

**

"Are you thinking of going home?" Ilka asked Pres, point blank, one night. She had invited him to her tent after night fell. They warmed themselves over a brazier.

"Madam, if you tell me when the next streetcar comes, I will think about it."

"You do have a home and a family."

"I'm not up to another journey."

"Legs fine?"

"Yes."

"Back strong?"

"Yes."

"Eyes back in focus?"

"You bet."

"But you are not ready--?"

"You must know that...the mind has to be strong too."

"Your mind is strong. That's what..." She was then silent. Then, "That is what made you survive your ordeal." His silence told her he was not ready.

But he was now ready to ask a question: "Who told you we were coming?"

"You have a friend in Russia...and general named Vorodenko."

Pres looked back into his memory. Yes, the Russian at Joe's wedding. "How is answered, but why would he do this?"

"He believes in helping his friends. And your brother...is his friend."

Joe, even though not identified by name, ended their conversation.

So his first month in camp ended and another month commenced, December.

He and Ilka often talked, but about general topics. They tried not to talk too much. As experienced leaders, they knew that other members of the camp, though seeming like level-headed people, might grow envious or defensive over their public if private conversations conducted in lively English. A group of seven people all alone could stay together or break apart over such things. Pres set about learning Urdu and Turkish. Halide and Makbule tutored him, genially smiling at his errors.

One warmish afternoon Ilka chose to sit outside in a protected corner where the sun collected like a pool, and write in a notebook. She was cautious with her paper supply and jam packed each page. Pres made himself sit down beside her. "Do you know what is going on in the world? It occurs to me now and then other things were happening when I was slogging over three thousand miles of Russian steppes."

"Korea," she finally said. "Many thought it was going to be World War III, but so far, not yet."

On June 25, 1950, the affair commenced when some 75,000 soldiers from the North Korean People's Army poured across the 38th parallel, the boundary between the Soviet-backed Democratic People's Republic of Korea to the north and the pro-western Republic of Korea to the South. This invasion was the first overt military action of the Cold War. By July, American troops, joining with UN troops, had entered the war on South Korea's behalf. The UN forces, which include British, French, and Australian troops, were easily driven back to the Pusan perimeter, crowded into the southeast corner of the country. However, the fighting finally stalled due to stretched supply lines, while Naval air forces led destruction of supplies and airfields. A successful landing at Inchon made it seem that MacArthur and western forces were in control, but then new forces, battle-hardened Chinese troops flooded in, and unwise UN attempts to invade and occupy the north, were pushed back. In the meantime, various officials sought to fashion an armistice between the north and south—if balance could not to be created, a wider war with the USSR and China threatened, with President Truman threatening to use the atomic bomb if either side openly supported the North...

"Shit," Pres said.

"Shit because you are upset with yet another war breaking out...or that you are missing it?"

"Well, you pinned me like a specimen on a board," Pres admitted. "Yes, to both. I'm good—damned good—at war, but I wonder about Joe--"

Too late. He glanced at Ilka as the seemingly forbidden topic of Joe Gallagher, whom she met in 1943, had a child with him, and child she lost during the war... rose between them, very clearly. "I have no current information about him," she said. "Or about...Anson."

After a rough moment, Pres said, "I told Joe about her. Gave him the necklace. He was very...moved." It seemed a safe word.

"Is he happy?"

"I don't know. He and his wife didn't have a child the last I know." He pushed away faces, memories, names, love, and disappointment. He even pushed away two little faces that came up. He asked, quickly, before he backed down again, "Ilka, what are you doing here?—I mean, how did you get here?"

"A very long story."

"Is that what you've been writing?"

Ilka went on to reveal a great deal of her pre-war life in the theatre. She had written *The Day of Orsza*, a play about Polish knights and Russian forces. The battle, over territory, honor, and all that sort of thing, was one of the most visible ending of chivalry between knights. It was also a kind of advent of total war that drove peasants from their farms, laid villages waste, poisoned rivers... Well lauded by critics and the aristocracy, she was invited to London on a series of lectures, during which she described how her first play would be followed by two others, making a trilogy...she then grew deeply personal...admitting that she lingered too long in England as she had an affair with a married British Member of Parliament. She was pretty much in his arms on September 1 1939. Her ability with Polish and Russian made her valuable to the British government during the eight months before Hitler struck out over western Europe and so she stayed convinced that her father, a mathematics professor would be too valuable to the invaders...

She and Pres were too adult, too weathered, too far away from conventional life to express moral qualms about her failures, as she termed them. How well he understood.

The following afternoon, she told him "I am working on a play about how Polish forces defended Vienna against the Ottoman Empire in 1670 and won in a stunning battle. Wonderful tool of suspense—the Ottoman sappers, mining under the walls—chink, chink, chink---while rabbis and priests argue..."

"Will the third be about you?" he then asked.

She grinned, if viciously. "If I wrote a play about my contributions to Polish freedom it would be a farce."

That ended conversation that afternoon. She wasn't angry with him, but she was at herself, he could tell. He didn't bother trying to approach her to cheer her up, as she hadn't tried to cheer him up.

One afternoon, as he once more joined her in the sunny protected corner, she left her notebook on the ledge while she tended to request coming from Halide. He was human enough to glance at her notebook. He saw a picture she had drawn of him. He was nude.

He was startled, but not much. He too had dreamed of her...nude.

**

In mid-December, as the snow bore down one night, Pres rose from his bed, quietly entered Ilka's tent, slid in beside her and quietly, as their campmates were just a few heartbeats away, made love, sharpened by lust. Pres had not been with a woman for months and he struggled with his equipment. But she responded, at first carefully, and then joyfully.

And oh, how he was relieved...that he could still feel and operate like a man; that he could enjoy sex and think about its pleasure during the day, rather than completely focused on being chased down and murdered by starvation, fear, worry...restraint...and that their bodies were twined in love, not just mere sex. Maybe a child... In those first two weeks of their nocturnal adventuring, though they never spoke of it in the light of day—or in the dark of night—she was relieved too. Perhaps, he thought, because he knew that someone found her desirable, despite her work, her weathering under many storms, her being “maimed” as she once bluntly described herself. Yes, he desired her, for her wisdom, her kindness, and, just being there...which he finally addressed after he came to her. “Darling,” he said to her as their heads rested on her tapestry pillow, “we need to talk about things.”

“What sort of things?” she murmured, though not carelessly. Avoiding asking questions of his silent hosts was many things: a gesture of courtesy, a kind of protection, a desire to avoid making decisions...

“Being beside you. With you.” Silence. “I mean, Joe...”

“Yes?” she asked, her voice both stern...yet relieved.

He chose his words one by one. “Would you... consider yourself...Joe's...’woman’?”

“How could I be his woman when we knew each other three days? We were two ships that came abreast of each other, during war. We bumped into each other, once.”

“That bump created a baby.”

“Unexpected—loved, and lost.”

“She’s not a ghost to come between us?”

“Neither is your brother. Pres, that was long ago.”

He loved how she spoke his name “Pres,” with just a hint of the ess becoming a zee...

“Joe...talked about you,” she said.

“Can I talk about Joe?”

“Can I talk first?”

“About Joe...?”

“I was very lonely when I met him. I think he was lonelier.”

Pres chuckled, but gently. “That kid? He hasn’t been lonely since he was thirteen—”

“He was lonely in a different way. You’ve commanded men, you must know—”

“Never. Not really. I mean, the guy in charge has got to go it alone in certain ways, but that doesn’t mean loneliness.”

“Your brother was lonely. Violently lonely. His commander had died suddenly. A commander he respected, hated. Felt responsible for his death, for certain reason. He had new responsibilities thrust on him. He fought with people. He had made mistakes that sent men to their death. When I arrived—after—his field was all—fucked up—he said, with his men suspecting each other, trying to find the blame for malfunctioning planes. And somebody he trusted...had told him that if his men had to die to smoke agents out, so be it. And he would be—racked—if he made official protests. Oh Pres, he was so lonely. We joined our loneliness together that one night.” When Pres quivered—was he trying to leave?—she took his head in her hands. “You are lonely too. Joe said you were lonely all your life.” When Pres seemed to try to leave, she pulled him back. “He wasn’t sorry for you. He spoke what he believed.”

“You spoke about me when you—”

“We spoke of our families. Whom we love—still love.”

She and Pres simply lay together the rest of the night. Whenever sleep approached, his own family...Betty, and Ben, who was pretending to salute him when daddy left, came to visit. His second son, whom he barely knew... He ended his own visit well before the late dawn, left for his own tent, and lay curled up in his sheepskin and leather cover.

The cloth walls moved, and she joined him.

They pressed tightly against each other...for warmth, for comfort. For the first time he became truly aware of her missing limb...when his hand moved slowly over the stump, she did not resist. "Do you have...phantom pains?" he asked. "Meaning, thinking you have pains in your...leg?"

"I manage them. But I am less able to manage pain here." She pressed her hand on his heart, and he pressed his hand on hers.

"You have so much pain," he whispered.

"We all have pain here. Every person in this camp has lost homes, loved ones...Cyprus, earthquakes, war, violence. Sergei and Makbule lost three children and a grandchild. We have become a family out of pain. What is your pain...here?"

"I have none."

"You have children. They don't have a father."

That ended their conversation. And their intimacy.

And they were silent with each other except for civil conversation. Pres could see that the two men and their wives were aware of a chill between them.

He helped with chores, whistled, thought, and thought, and thought. He fallen in love with an incredible woman, who had "known" his brother and had his child. His wife and children were on their own, thousands of miles and seemingly thousands of years away. He had a helluva lot of music to face if he returned to the United States. One man who could have told the truth about his activities was dead, and pretty damned unlamented. Another man who swore to defend him had lied, most likely. What he should do battled with what he could do. He could spend the rest of his life here. With Ilka. In peace.

No, only a kind of peace. If he were to die today, not doing what he could to return to his family, would trouble his final moments, that he knew.

**

The courier was coming. He came once a month to deliver reports and take back their reports. He should be here the next day. Ilka told him this, flatly, cautiously. Pres mulled over going back with him. Ilka knew what he was mulling. She said nothing about his thoughts, but one day told him...that the courier was coming.

Pres then asked, before he had a chance to change his mind, "Why am I here?"

She demurred. "Explain yourself, please."

"We were found and sent here. I made it here. Why? For a while, being alive and here was enough. It's no longer enough."

"Enough for what?"

"To keep me here. Oh, Ilka...I want to stay but I need a reason, I need a great big fucking enormous reason to stay..."

"And I'm not reason enough," she said, but with complete understanding.

"A guy's got to know what the hell's going on..." His hand reached out and framed her cheek. "I love you—I adore you—but dammit, it's still not enough. Give me a reason, a good one and I will be by your side, forever."

She stared at him. She loosened his hand's grip, and kissed it, gently, on the palm. "Darling, I will take your vow, though nothing lasts forever. Let's wait for the courier." She led him to edge of their camp and pointed out to him a slender defile that bled down to meet with the enormous white expanse of rock. The courier came through that defile, and then boldly walked over the rock, to indicate who he was. The morning light was already glaring off the sweep of rock. "It's called Beyaz Alan," she said.

His Turkish was far from good. "Which means--?"

"The White Field."

The rest of the day passed tranquilly. Their four comrades knew that the two had reconciled, and were pleased, and Halide suddenly proposed a special dish that night. After they ate and policed the camp, and sealed all places that light could shine out, Ilka and Pres calmly withdrew into her tent, and made love gently, then fiercely, and then gently again. There was little between them, she murmured, figuratively and literally. She had finally told him, deep in one of those nights, her own story, which had parallels with his own. In 1943, she had volunteered to return to Poland...for two reasons: first, as a kind of a darling of the Polish "government in exile," she was given critical documents and information to deliver to the Polish underground; microfilm was hidden in the collar of the shirt she wore as she hurtled down into Poland with Joe watching. "Did you...did he...ask you to stay?"

"Never in words. He knew I had to go, though not all the reasons I had. I wanted to find out about my family. I had a lover there...one of the Polish officers shot by the Soviets in the Katyn massacre, his sister was very dear to me.

“Perhaps above all I had to do something for my country, my people. I was a Pole and I was proud to be a Pole but nothing good came out of my good intentions...”

“No welcome mat...?” He explained what he meant as she enjoyed learning colloquial American.

“Some yes, some no. When I first met with the underground leaders they were welcoming but I soon knew they were scared I was there to take leadership away from them..! As if...when it was learned I was pregnant, oh what a wicked woman I was. They made so much of it. I learned my family had died. I had to send Anson away—and lost her. When I joined with the Communists after the war—which didn’t last long—I was beyond scarlet. The Polish government in exile had been told stories about me so I was no longer their ‘pin up girl’ if I remember the phrase right.”

“That is how you came to Albania?—where we met,” he added, fondly.

“With the help of people in British intelligence. In some ways, I had nowhere else to go. And I could be very useful as I knew English and eastern European tongues.”

“How did you get all the way here?”

“Azem and Leka—remember them?”

“God, yes.” He could still remember how she sliced off one of their ears. Pretty shocking, even for him, but he knew she had to do what she had to do. They were then killed while trying to prevent Pres and his men from leaving.

“For a while their deaths kept their friends at bay. Then the story came out that I knew where ‘gulgar ari’ was and I was making sure no one else would have it, even to hurting, killing people. So they would torture me until I told. Then kill me. I didn’t laugh at the story.”

“Did you escape?—well of course you did...”

“With the help of some British SOEs, and over some slain bodies...” She suddenly groaned and turned from him. When he caressed her shoulder, she turned into his arms and she let go of her tears. “I have no home. No home but this. And I’m so tired of death. Violence. I have no family or friends to care about or for them to care if I am alive or dead.” Even in the dark he could see her eyes driving into his. “With you I could have a home. Anywhere we are or will go, there will be home. Darling,” she then whispered to him. “How do you like your coffee in the morning...?”

**

“Dear God,” Joe said, lowering his field glasses.

He bent his head and said a prayer of thanks. His brother was found, and at the moment, why the hell was he here and what the hell he had become involved with had not entered Joe's mind. After a moment, he brought the glasses up again and watched as Pres reached out and gripped her face; he also saw how she removed his hands and kissed them, and he melted against her—and her against them, both sinking to their knees.

And the woman was Ilka. Despite knowing her so brief a time, and not having seen her in years, he knew her movements, and felt her warmth and savvy even across the distance, across the years. Yes, Ilka, with whom he had a child, and the lock of that baby's hair was still against his chest. He felt a rip of jealousy go through his heart—and yet joy to find his brother, alive...and now what?

Now what was answered quickly in a way...a man came into the camp. He seemed welcome as nobody scattered or seized rifles.

Zisalm put a hand on Joe's arm and pointed upwards.

Joe looked up to see a man all of twenty feet away, taking aim with a high caliber rifle. He was aiming at the happy people on the faraway ridge...and fired.

November 25: China issued warnings that the United Nation forces should cease aggression against North Korea, while preparing a trap to crush MacArthur's army, which had advanced too quickly into North Korea. Chinese forces were hazarded to be as large as 200,000 invade North Korea. Caught unprepared, the United Nation forces are pushed backwards, in a disorganized hasty retreat. Later dubbed "the Big Bugout," this was the longest retreat ever suffered by United States forces.

Harvey and Melva: No Peace but Love in a Baby's Cry...

"Mam, sir?" came a voice from the beyond the bedroom door, after a polite tap. "Maureen be-- is crying."

Melva had not stirred, so Harvey got up, threw his robe on, opened the door to find Jonathon Buckhouse regarding him apologetically. He was bunking with them while they found rooms for him somewhere in Bassingbury; lack was one culprit, and Jonathon's color the other. He had proved helpful as a baby entered the Stovall residence, delivered at the recently expanded Bassingbury General, without a mishap. Bringing her home was quite another thing!—despite being a midwife, and accustomed to babies' needs, Melva was still laughingly stunned at how a baby changed a household—all was centered on this little bundle of flesh, which demanded, slept, cried, wet, made mounds of laundry that Melva had to string out in the kitchen because the new laundry line had collapsed under snow. But Maureen, whose name came from Melva's now deceased mother, was that apple of her parents' eyes.

The apple was crying, not gustily, but enough to know she was hungry or wet. Melva staggered up behind him. "Go back to sleep," Harvey told her. "You were on duty all day yesterday, diarrhea and all. "Thanks," she murmured, and returned to the bedroom.

Maureen, now almost three months old, recognized Harvey after he turned on the bunny lamp on the dresser and leaned over the crib her for the usual inspections... Her little face lighted up, the pink lips smiled with recognition and his heart melted. "Here sir," said Jonathon, unfolding a diaper. "Should I warm up the formula?" "Yes, please," he said, commencing operations; though over a quarter-century had passed since Mike's babyhood, Harvey had recalled things well. And was pleased to note that the diaper was only wet; no dribbly poop from the day before.

A few minutes later, in the glow and smell of the multi-colored lights on the Christmas tree, he said "There, young lady, how about keeping this one dry for fifteen minutes, hm?" He sat down in the rocker and accepted the bottle of formula from Jonathon's hands and maneuvered the nipple into her little pink rosebud mouth. "Ahhhh," he sighed, smiling at Buckhouse. "Thanks." He nodded at the radio. "Let's hear the latest round of bad news between Christmas carols."

"Christmas Day," Buckhouse sighed. "The boys should have been home by now." The radio glowed to life and Jingle Bells was being sung, in anticipation of the wonderful day.

"They also said that before the Bulge," Harvey remembered.

Obligingly draining the bottle into the amazing gift life had given them, a baby, a second time of fatherhood, becoming chair of brand new law college—the semester commenced a mere six weeks after Maureen’s birth--Harvey counted his blessings...and worried about his worries.

A Christmas card from the Komanskys...they were in Hawaii, with Sandy finishing his training at air-sea rescue via helicopters on carriers on the Sea of Japan. He and Margaret were taking care of Margaret’s cousin too, they remember a bratty kid at the wedding Life was interesting... A Christmas card from Ceile, written weeks before the holiday, told him she was being assigned Air Force flight nurse duty out of Japan.

As for Joe...God knew.

But there was another thing. The day before, a Christmas card had arrived from the Creightons. Along with announcing a second child was on the way, Dave Creighton had written, “give him a call.” Harvey did several days into the New Year of 1951, and learned....that nothing new had been learned. It was as if the spooks themselves had vanished. Good or bad...who knew? But Creighton signed off with “Congratulations, Dad!”

Dad, Harvey thought. The bottle was empty, and he carefully lifted and placed Maureen over his shoulder, towel in place, and gently patted her back, and patted and patted, and jogged a bit until a tiny “ulp” and some dribble completed the process. “There you go, Apple,” he said, and braced as the hourly news described a violent part of a world that he and his wife had brought this new life into.

December, 1950: With their backs to the Sea of Japan, and also fighting a brutally cold winter, US Marines became encircled at the Choisin Reservoir retreat to the ports of Hungnam and Wonsan, site of evacuation. The numerically superior and battle hardened Chinese forces routed 15,000 troops. Of those numbers, 12000 were casualties, and 3000 died. The victorious Chinese however caught a similar case of victor’s disease, and overran their supply lines. Expecting to live off the land, they found only abandoned farms, crops ripped out and taken away or destroyed, and ironically, many survived on the abandoned US supply dumps...they found the tomato juice terrible, but appreciated the blankets. Nonetheless, a stalemate was looming as superior UN firepower went up against superior North Korean manpower...all set in an unforgiving terrain.

