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Inventory: Encounter with a Father's Memories of War

My mother saves nothing, hurls objects and memories overboard to keep the boat from sinking; her English wartime childhood a heap of broken images, she pulled anchor at 18 to marry a Yank, still lives, by choice or disposition, without past or future beyond the seasons' turnings. She keeps no special trove of children's drawings, no yellowing love letters from the front. Her only visits to the attic, so far as I can remember, were to fetch the Christmas ornaments out of storage. So it's a kind of miracle survivor, this war chest of my father's that has suddenly buoyed up twenty years after his death, from my mother's latest, abrupt and radical embarkation.

He wasn't really a saver any more than she is, or a Yankee by birth, since Newfoundland in 1913 was a British territory. A hard-knocks Boston childhood as a "Newfie," an education broken up by lack of funds, a jittery wife and meddling mother—not much to cling to there. The army, in spring 1942, lent nobility to "running away" (as some of his family saw it); and anyway, no Eagle Scout veteran could "sit out the war," even if his talents might better serve behind the lines. So the story this box tells begins with the 81st mortar battalion and circles back to it often over the decades, as ready defense against the civilian wars to follow, the disappointments and assaults of everyday life in the placid postwar years.

There are no skeletons in this small closet, no Don Draper double life hidden under layers of suburban propriety. Everything in the box can be help up to the light of day; what was passed over in silence remains mute even here—a unit leader

in the army, he knew well enough how to censor even himself. Nevertheless, a whiff of mystery seeps out, and other people's stories circulate around it, even bits of my own particular and average story, though the box was assembled without regard to me.

The person who made this collection and saved this box was born and raised in a world utterly different from the one he brought me into—a world of horse drawn ice trucks, not refrigerators in a choice of six colors; a world of Bibles and moral primers; of few securities and many convictions. To contemplate its contents is of course a personal matter for me—reviving memories of a deep and mostly unexpressed family affection. But it is also to feel the counterpoint of two generations.

Rummaging through I find dog tags, a trench knife, news clippings, maps of Europe dated 1944, tarnished foreign coins, pamphlets giving the history of the D Day invasion and the march to the Rhine, petitions, reports, all fascinating artifacts, impersonal and remote, except for the firm right-hand fingerprints on the canvas officer's ID —fingerprints left also on pistols, on curly heads. And wound up with the dog tags' ball chain is a more delicate, blackening chain that holds a locket. Opening the locket, I find his image on one side, very young, but I recognize the full-face grin. A wedding picture from his first marriage? The other side is empty; she died September 1942, a suicide, leaving their child, while he was in training.

The wartime photographs are salient, of course. I remember finding these in my father's huge mahogany desk when I was about 8. Their allure like illustrations out of Grimm—dark forests, Bavarian castles, ruined towns; tortured, emaciated bodies, wandering soldiers, jesters, ogres, and princes disguised in peasants' clothing. More than fifty years later the context is filled in a bit, but they seem no less mythic. These items I will send to the World War II museum in New Orleans. They belong to history, but not really to *my* history.

But then I open a slender, felt-lined rectangular box and find a silver-star medal and folded document inside and my pulse quickens.

I have seen this before, many years before, ahead of Vietnam, assassinations, and “the generation gap.” Before *The Feminine Mystique* and “the personal is political.” I am 12, the eldest of four daughters born after the war. *The Longest Day* is playing in the cinema. (The other movie house nearby has *Lolita*.) Unfit for duty, unready for the ambush of history, I am chosen as his deputy to face the reenactment. Other people's time, let alone the historical past, is theoretical to a girl of 12. *The Longest Day* is celluloid-thin, categorically black and white, often in German with inscrutable subtitles. No match for the psychedelic colors soon

on the culture's horizon. The screen-sized maps with advancing dotted trails, the sumptuous palaces and rigid, high-booted officers, the choppy seas and endless armada, the body-strewn beaches, all a jumble of images, not a narrative. John Wayne should be riding a horse, I think, not driving a jeep. Paul Anka is our teen babysitter's crush; I have seen him on *Dick Clark*—hard to believe him as an army ranger. Uncomprehending, even bored, I nevertheless feel a sense of mission, of special confidence, as we return home late from the too-long film of the longest day, mother and sisters already asleep. He beckons me to his dark desk, opens a small drawer. There is the slim box, the inscrutable silver star and typed citation—a jumble of formidable phrases under my eyes: “gallantry,” “invasion,” “knowing to linger would be certain death,” “enemy machine gun, sniper, mortar, artillery fire.” What was a sniper? Where was Vierville-sur-Mer? Then, embarrassed by his show of vanity, he briskly folds it up again; the box goes back in the drawer. “Don't tell your mother I showed you this.” Goodnight, baby. Goodnight, Dad. . .

And then the mighty undertow of adolescence in the Sixties pulling me far out from this shore, in waves of self-doubt and self-creation, across the channel to adulthood. All quiet now, my own children launched, father gone and mother soon enough. Now I can listen.

Also in the box I find a Fuji cassette tape marked “D-Day.”

This I never knew about. Must have been made long after I left home. I find a player that still works. Much has been written about the uncanny presence of the dead in photographs—but the voice out of time is stranger, more unsettling, although also sometimes sweeter than any image. Here is his voice as an old man, the slightly nasal drawl, with traces of the Boston accent, his breath already a struggle, but still the inspired raconteur, careful with his pauses, mixing grim drama with humor, fact with philosophy. The tape clicks on and off as he splices his anecdotes together. To whom is he speaking? “You probably know . . .” He places his story in the historic record, gives facts the color of romance: “ships as far as the eye could see steering toward the shores of France.” The retired biochemist, coolly recollecting his own adrenaline strength, with more clinical fascination than pride: “no fatigue, no fear, like a fix.” How did he manage, he wonders, to drag guns out of water, carry 100-pound mortar on his back across a waste-deep marsh, climb up 150-foot bluffs under fire? He wants “you” to feel and see, the cold wind and four foot waves, the men vomiting from the tossing seas, the landing boats torn and blocked by underwater barriers, everyone wading ashore under fire, the inflating life belt crushing the chest with pressure of all the gear until he cuts it loose (so that is what the knife is for!), men moaning, bodies floating and sinking,

tanks and artillery sucked into the sea, the tide coming in fast, shells ricocheting off beach shingle, mines exploding, the commanding officer paralyzed with fear, crouched behind a defensive tetrahedron (no shelter at all, he is soon hit), the urgent collecting of disorganized squads. Revisiting Normandy in 1978 he and the two other “surviving officers” find a grim irony in a sign near Les Molines: “*Non gardé : baignade dangereuse*”); unguarded: dangerous bathing.”

His American sense of humor, never too black, leavens the heavy tale. Optimism certainly helped to win the war. Buck Weaver singing “roll me over in the clover” on the last night on board, and everyone joining in. Corporal Sabione beautiful as a “Venetian doge,” whose “roman nose” was shot off in the battle of the hedgerows; he “showed up later in Metz” at a replacement depot with a “remake job,” “even more beautiful.” In the hedgerows, a French woman offers a rose, kisses the liberator. But a somber mood prevails, and a sense of unredeemable loss; not all endings are happy in this romance. The gallant young medic turns up at the first reunion but is overcome with shell shock and has to be taken home. And the tape ends there, after about 35 minutes, without closure; he probably meant to return to it.

I take the trench knife out of the box: “US issue Camillus M3.” The Camillus was designed for hand-to-hand combat. My mother once told me that in their first months of marriage he would sometimes wrestle her in his sleep, have to be shaken awake from some far away, deadly intimacy. How much of memory is touch. I try to imagine my father’s grip around the knife’s dark leather handle; the too-tight grip that steered us across busy streets and other dangerous passes of the postwar years.

Having finished my inventory of the objects, I turn to the folders and binders at the bottom of the box. These ask more of my time and attention, more at least than I gave as I was twirling through our years together, my eye on the door.

There’s a folder containing a musical score with hand-typed verses: “The Ballad of the Stovepipe Artillery” music by Dave and Hazel Frankel with lyrics by Dr. Christopher H. Costello (always the ready versifier), copyright 1982. The sensibility, like the artillery itself, is from another era—the time of Kipling, of Robert Service—already out of style when he left home. But then he was old for a soldier.

1. Out of the crashing surf they came
Drag-ging their tubes of steel
Thru a hell of smoke and shot and shell
That made the sens-es reel
Who is this band of broth-ers E-mer-ging from the sea?
It’s the Eighty First Battalion, The Stove-pipe Ar-til-ler-ry!

Chorus:

Oh the four point twos have rug-ged crews, They-'re Mis-sis-sip-pi's best
They'd swap their shoes for a bottle of booze And a lit-tle bit of rest! . . .

and on for four more verses. Sung at reunions, presumably. There are drafts in the folder too—pages of ballad poetry for D company. It's the 19th not the 20th, let alone the 21st century's, version of "war is hell," the sort of ballad my own generation could only slander. When I was 15 I brought home *Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* and played it over and over on the living room stereo. He enjoyed the folksy tunes like "Don't Think Twice" and "Girl from the North Country," but then "Masters of War" infuriated him. A few months later my parents moved the old stereo to the den downstairs and the generations in our household began to live their largely separate lives.

The "stovepipe" technology had been designed in WW I for chemical weaponry, but refitted, in a period of Allied restraint and conscience, to the 25 lb. "4.2", TNT mortar shell. (In retrospect I find that he wasn't naive about "the good war": no poison gas, no napalm, true; just white phosphorous that could, as he wrote "choke, blister, & burn and otherwise horribly maim & kill our fellow man who happened to be wearing a different uniform.") But it was chiefly used to damage enemy stores and for protective clouds in support of advancing Allied infantry. My father the pharmacologist, who made his living before and after the war inventing salves for headaches, cramps, skin irritations, and other minor afflictions, could nevertheless swagger at his power to blow out Hitler's defenses.

I had put aside the loose-leaf Campus Plus notebook, containing a daunting 80 pages of handwritten text, "Testament of Christopher H. Costello. First Writing." But having perused all the other, laconic items in the box, I take it up.

As a young adult I had been vaguely aware on my visits home that, since his retirement from Colgate, he had been sitting at the dining room table trying to set down his wartime adventures. A date on the notebook's inside cover tells me I was 30 when this writing was underway, a new assistant professor of English, anxious to shape my own story, face my own battles, hardly attentive to his retirement projects. Who doesn't write a memoir at his age? (I smirk at myself as I write this now.) The opening could be anyone's:

This is a story I've been wanting to tell for thirty years but have always found one excuse or another for putting it off to a more opportune, more leisurely time. Marriage, completing my education, picking up the threads

of a scientific career, raising a family and the demands of my job were some of these excuses but I guess inertia and the pain of opening old forgotten wounds were the main reason for my vacillation.

To whom is a memoir addressed? Certainly, in this case, to his comrades at arms, the surviving veterans he saw at reunions. More urgently, a neglectful military bureaucracy, and a post-Vietnam public that would rather forget about wars altogether. “This is my requiem for the 81st. It is not the monument it deserves, but it is likely the only one it gets” begins the fourth paragraph. An appeal for acknowledgement (which would come a few years later with a drawn out but ultimately successful campaign by some of the veterans for a plaque in Normandy honoring the battalion.)

Leafing through these pages now, I find to my surprise that in fact I did read and comment on the first half, back then. He asked for my professional advice and that is what I provided, no more, no less. My marginal comments shock me; they are so cool, so impersonal, those of an editor, not a daughter. “Maybe start with a brief anecdote or description of a scene”; “say this through concrete detail”; “again more revealing detail, less evaluative generality”; “shorten”; “sharpen contrast.” And a long summary comment about half way through the notebook: “It’s a good mix of human and technical history . . . Mostly what it needs is a clearer organization . . . Sharp juxtapositions and contrasts will help . . .” and so on. Was this really what he wanted from me? I doubt it now. But perhaps his family was not the intended audience, just bystanders in his struggle with oblivion. Like any writer, he is speaking to a self he is afraid to lose, an innocent, heroic self that can still fight off the shadows. He must have resumed the project after I returned the notebook. He almost seems a prisoner of the memory, called back to it like the ancient mariner. Or maybe I just think of this because he used to quote long passages of Coleridge by heart, learned in the days when every high school student memorized poetry.

Reading through the pages of this “testament” now I recognize the sensibility, its old code of integrity, of honor and sacrifice, and its Victorian rhetoric. Maybe he is writing to the past, in fact, to a lost culture that shared this code. Reflecting on the bond among men who fight together, he turns to Kipling for an epigraph, the warrior-poet’s disdain for civilian gaiety.

I have eaten your bread & salt,
I have drunk your water & wine
The deaths ye died I have watched

beside,
And the lives that ye led were mine.

Was there aught I did not share
In vigil or toil or ease,-
One joy or woe that I did not know,
Dear hearts across the seas?

I have written the tale of our life
for a sheltered people's mirth
In jesting guise—but ye are wise
And you know what the jest is worth.

(Departmental Ditties and Other Verses, Rudyard Kipling)

Certainly I, and all my contemporaries, were “sheltered people,” though the poetry that gripped me in my youth said otherwise: “the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked. . .”

His 80 page “requiem” was no doubt intended as the full saga, one that would tell the battalion history, the same history set down in a small official pamphlet (also in the box) which he helped to write in 1945, but this would tell it from the inside, pushing across France, Belgium, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany. But the labor of writing defeated the invincible forward observer, it seems, or something else impeded the completion of this mission. The story leaves off state side, the last page ending abruptly in Louisiana, the final training center before shipping out on the journey to the other side.

Still, in reading these pages now I find a compelling story, one only minimally told in the official pamphlet, in civilian history books, or in popular culture—the story of preparation, of conversion of rough and heterogeneous civilian recruits into a unit of fighting men. A romantic tale of male initiation rights; except that it isn't fiction. What could be more remote from my life as a female English professor in the new millennium, disdainful of violent patriarchy and its hollow, self-interested codes of honor, service and sacrifice? And yet I'm pulled in, succumbing to the writer's sense of high purpose and commitment, and to his sheer impulse to tell a story.

Here my father's gift for anecdote and portraiture flourishes. He is paying homage to unsung heroes, settling old scores, relishing or regretting outcomes, taking pleasure in the proof of his initial judgments. As in classic war narratives,

the civilian recruit has no patience for the career officer, someone beneath him in intelligence, but swollen with the petty power of his superior rank.

The great antagonist of the story is Colonel James. One sees the author, as he recalls James' command, seething with rage, then restraining his tone as he recovers his nobler self:

Chiefly responsible was the Battalion original C.O., Lt. Col. Thomas H. James, CWS. James was not popular with either his officers or his men. Remote, sarcastic A product of West Point. James was still a Lt. Col. while most of his classmates were full colonels or Brigadiers. He was seldom seen to smile, was unapproachable, sardonic, sarcastic, a stickler for form, and contemptuous of civilian soldiers particularly "90 day wonders" officers. He tolerated reserve (ROTC) officers but held that the highest form of human life was a West Pointer. He was, thank God, the only West Pointer the 81st was ever to have.

James drove the outfit almost to the point of sadism. James' demand for perfection was almost sadistic. The slightest infraction of a regulation was always rewarded with the maximum punishment. A severe disciplinarian he believed in "throwing the book" at an offender and always instructed a court martial board to inflict the maximum penalty which he would "alleviate" if on review he thought it was merited. I never knew him to reduce a court martial sentence. Although I did not discover this until after I had been in the outfit for some time, the Colonel was also an alcoholic although he never drank while on duty. I never saw him drunk except off duty. The booze did not improve his disposition; if anything, it worsened it.

The sadistic Colonel James loved to test the newcomer, assert his authority against any shave-tail with civilian credentials:

After the formal reporting-in ritual, James without any preliminary planning had me sit down and proceeded to examine my file, which I had handed over to him. As the interview progressed it became apparent that Col James did not have a very high opinion of citizen-soldiers in general and those that became officers through OCS in particular. One of his first remarks was "I see you have acquired a pretty fancy scientific education." "Thank you,

I said.” “Now tell me, Lieutenant, how much good will all those degrees do you in this outfit?” I replied, “I didn’t ask for service in this battalion expecting any favored treatment because of my education, Colonel, but the fact that I have earned them indicates a certain amount of intelligence, which could be useful in any situation, including this organization, don’t you think?” He glared at me over his glasses and cleared his throat. “Well, we’ll see,” he said.

But, resisting the temptation to personal resentment, the author gives James his due as an agent of history:

Despite all his faults, James was a soldier all the way & a good one. Except for a handful of regular army enlisted men & a warrant officer, he was the only real professional in the outfit. His motive for insistence on perfection may have been motivated by his ambition to catch up with his peers, but perfection he got and he didn’t have a hell of a lot to work with despite the He welded a motley group of humans into a superb fighting machine despite his own and our handicaps. I didn’t like James but I respect him for that.

The narrative turns to the enlisted men, for whom his affection is unreserved. He is older and much better educated than they, rough Southerners, the right age to be children of Agee’s “famous men,” I imagine. But then his own origins are hardscrabble too, so perhaps he saw a bit of himself in them, more than in the officers. And it is not difficult to believe that the differences that count for so much in the civilian world fall away in the high relief of war, leaving exposed only that quality we call “mettle” or “fiber,” that essential weave of being that alone matters when the stakes are mortal:

So much for the officers of the 81st and now to the guts of the outfit, the enlisted men. . . . Full strength was attained in October 1942 when 500 raw recruits all Mississippi farm boys were assigned to the battalion without a shred of any previous basic training. It must have been a herculean task to whip these inexperienced lads into even a semblance of military organization. I did not join the 81st until four months later but much remained to be done. The draft boards in Mississippi must have been hard-pressed to meet their quota. Some of the men could neither read nor write, even though literacy was a legal requirement before a man could be drafted. Classes were quickly organized

and the boys were taught the three R's. Although the average educational level was no higher than the sixth grade, we soon learned that these men possessed a native intelligence that allowed them to quickly adapt to military life. They excelled in the field if not the classroom, were all crack shots, and could really take care of themselves in the open. They also had another skill which proved to be invaluable in combat—they were all distillers by avocation. Their manner of speech was charming but sprinkled with the most obscene profanity, their religion was strictly born-again fundamental Baptist and all firmly believed the South would rise again! Their attitude towards their Yankee officers was respectful but distant, neither insubordination nor ass-kissing. No favors were asked or expected and when they occasionally erred they took even Col. James's brand of punishment stolidly. Though fond of strong drink they were rarely if ever drunk on duty. They were probably clothed, housed, & fed better than they had ever been in their lives, but they bitched about their tight new boots & hankered for a mess of turnip greens, black eye peas, pork belly & corn bread. Despite their handicaps, the Mississippians became the backbone of the outfit & in my view the finest and most loyal soldiers that ever bore arms. They exemplified in the crucible of war the battalion motto "Equal to the Task."

What most strikes me in the memoir is my father's love for this remote and unfamiliar Texas landscape around Fort Russell, an old border patrol cavalry outpost in Big Bend country. The harsh desert expanses somehow spoke to the soul of this bluenose cod-eater who had never been west of Virginia, and only got *there* for basic training. Reading his description of Marfa Texas, I understand why for this son of an old salt and father of daughters, *Bonanza* was the favorite family TV series. We had each selected a mate from the Cartwright clan (Adam for Christine, tall and brooding; Hoss for plump Sheila; Little Joe for Sharon, the runt in our family. My heart was all for the widower, Ben.)

I loved the ragged barren beauty of the country. Standing half-way between the Pecos & Rio Grande Marfa sat on a high barren plateau which supported not a single blade of green grass or a tree but provided enough sustenance to be called the Home of the Highland Hereford. Evidently that wiry, dead looking vegetation provided the right balance of minerals and vitamins to make it ideal for breeding cattle. In the distance one saw a small range of mountains known as the Smith Hills, named after the famous Deaf Smith

of Texan Independence, topped by the landmark of the County, Cathedral Mountain. This mountain, sporting a volcano and accompanied by the lone star of Texas became part of the Battalion insignia.

One of my fondest memories is of riding through that country on a cavalry mount lent to me by our hospitable cavalry neighbor.

Equally remembered but not so fondly are the long cross-country marches over volcanic rock terrain called cleoche that cut tender, uninitiated feet like mine to pieces the first time out. That ground was meant to be crossed on the backs of horses not on foot by men, but we did it repeatedly dragging our mortar carts behind us day and night. The lay-marches were hot and dirty in blistering sunlight. But the air was so dry that no perspiration was evident except under the shoulder straps of your pack or under your pistol belt. The night marches were extremely cold at that altitude of nearly a mile high but the principle hazards were the possibility of stumbling onto a herd of half-wild steers & getting caught in a stampede or stepping on a rattler or a side-winder. On our climbs in the Smith Hills we soon learned not to put our hand on a ledge until we checked it out for rattlers. Karl Weissinger, D Co. Co. had shot a rattler in the head with his 45 on such a climb.

The sadistic Colonel James tested him against this landscape, sending him out to command a night march the day after his arrival. With what relish my father relays this trial, 35 years later—the skeptical gazes of the undisciplined troops, the foot-bleeding trek with only moonlight to guide them, side-winders lurking, the greater anxiety about reaching the early morning mess cart on time at the unmapped desert cross, the triumphant parade in front of company headquarters, the victory over James' wager.

I have never been to Texas. The town's name came from the unlikely source of Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* where "Marfa" is the housekeeper and surrogate mother of the four brothers. (The wife of the railway company president was reading the novel in 1883.) It had been a cavalry post since that time. Abruptly, I remember the unlikely link to my own rarified world of postwar art and culture, remote as it is from this testing ground of men and mortar. The year my father began this memoir, Donald Judd, minimalist sculptor and radical art theorist, gave up the New York art scene and purchased 30 acres in Marfa, along with the abandoned buildings of Fort Russell. He filled the artillery sheds with art, one

hundred polished aluminum squares of his design, along with work by Carl Andre, Claes Oldenburg, John Chamberlain and Dan Flavin. What would the Kipling-loving veteran have felt about these postmodern Overlords, I wonder? But then he thought of himself as a maverick, and a creator, not a destroyer, so perhaps as a soldier he was protecting “a sheltered people’s mirth,” and a future generation’s right to be seriously frivolous. He might have loved seeing this foundry of deadly artillery occupied and refitted as a dreamspace. After all, James Dean, Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor had already passed through in 1956, to film *Giant*.

A memoir tells only the story its author wants to tell, though we may read other stories into its lacunae and laconic moments. But a memory box, unlike a memoir alone, does not control its story. It selects and assembles, but it does not interpret or cancel. It speaks with many voices, even silenced ones. Mute objects wait for their beholder to sound them out. Later developments shadow early hopes and vows.

Also in the box is a bundle of letters, six inches thick, each letter 8 to 10 pages, fountain pen on onion paper, in envelopes postmarked between April 1945 and January 1946.

A memoir is written for Posterity, for Anonymous, for the Unborn. If the audience is wide, the authorship is narrow, a single voice that will not be contradicted in its account. Letters are messier, written in event time, not just in memory; immediately consequential. They are collaborations, at least psychologically. And war-time letters are messier still, event time constantly scrambled, many postings lost or at best delayed, subject to the vagaries of mail, the scrutiny of the censor; and besides these practical gaps there is the vast existential chasm between soldier and civilian, and the ontological divide from the lived future that inevitably belies the shining self created in letters. And yet letter writing may be (or once was) the most vital, human genre of war, the soldier’s link to home and normality, the place where he justifies himself, reassures himself he is more than a pawn or a destroyer, imagines his return, begs not to be forgotten.

Despite this strong sense of a voice in time, I can read many of these letters with a disinterested eye, because it is not my time. I did not know the person who wrote them, as I knew the memoirist; he will always be a stranger. Most of these envelopes bear one address: 45 Pilgrim Road, Marblehead, MA. Here lived my father’s brother Roy and Roy’s wife Ellen, whom I never met (after the war, a falling out), with their young family, cousins I never knew, and caring as well for my little motherless half-sister Judy, from 1943 to 1946. The first letter in the packet is dated April 5, 1944, so the set, written in real time, fortuitously picks up, in my reading, where the memoir leaves off. The letters are full of detail and interest, with

news about troop movement and shells going off as he writes; they express personal thoughts and hopes, and ask for news from Marblehead; but at first they have the quality of old newspapers, or old movies with an Everyman hero, advancing the plot with those spinning front-page headlines. How different were the headlines of the era I grew up in, when the patriotic chorus had turned to a shouting match and a muffled scream.

The return address is Co. D (and later B, when he was transferred) 81st Btn. A.P.O. 230 New York, but all the letters come from overseas. Stateside training has ended. They have been stationed in Penkridge, Staffordshire for the winter and have now moved to the Assault Training Center in Ilfracombe, in Devon, where Slapton Sands offers ideal conditions for preparation. He is anxious about the horror ahead, his own capacity for violence. But the current ideology says this will be a creative destruction, readying the world for a new birth:

All my life I've tried to create something, sometimes not realizing what I was striving for. Destruction hasn't been part of my life, but I'm ready to carry it out now, just as aggressively as I tried to create in the old days.

It's a sentiment he shared with other soldiers, indeed with many Americans in the Forties. A decadent, monstrous reality must be uprooted to make way for the shining one Americans would help to bring about. The war would be within as well, a struggle against complaisance and hubris that would keep the American soul supple, tender and strong. Writing in 1944, William Carlos Williams, whose sons were overseas, struggled to find the war's justification in the image of burning Christmas greens. "Their time past, pulled down / cracked and flung to the fire [...] burnt clean / clean in the flame . . . breathless to be witnesses, / as if we stood / ourselves refreshed among / the shining fauna of that fire." (Williams, "Burning the Christmas Greens")

Williams' poem is a long way from Kipling's ethos of the soldier's sacrifice for a sheltered people. No one is sheltered; the whole society is marshaled in the work of this violent transformation. But the change is necessary, even exhilarating.

There were few such redemptive myths left in the time of my youth, in 1967: "When the forests have been destroyed their darkness remains / The ash the great walker follows the possessors / Forever / Nothing they come to is real" (W. S. Merwin, "Asians Dying")

My high school in 1965-66 showed government newsreels in compulsory morning auditorium, explaining the Communist threat and the Vietnam offensives. Even

then these seemed hollow propaganda to most of us, stirring our revulsion, not our patriotism. “This is Hell and we are the devil’s disciples,” wrote many a marine from Vietnam. My friends’ brothers were already planning their trips to Canada, or talking about how to fake being queer. Ours was a household of girls—an unspoken relief for my father, I knew, even then.

But the letters in the box are those of the confident American G.I., not the conflicted old veteran who is watching his society degenerate. His optimism and moral decency are uncompromised. The letters work to establish and maintain this fabulous profile, both for himself and for those at home. He is sturdier than the enemy because nobler, at once more courageous and more capable of sympathy; more human, but less corruptible. “Never such innocence again” wrote the English poet Philip Larkin in 1960, in a poem about 1914.

My father’s letters to his family reveal a desire to entertain with anecdotes, to make the European front vivid where he can (“there’s so damn little I’m allowed to say”) and not too grim. He writes from the point of view of an American liberator, who has a sense of gravitas about the great drama in which he plays a part, but who finds nothing so “grand” and “swell” as the life back home, where Paul gets a new bike and neighbor Carrie visits her mother in Minnesota. Indeed, sentimental moments remind him of home. Lost at night on a reconnaissance mission, he comes across a chateau occupied by a French family where all the brothers are priests, their orphanage a secret station of the French underground, part of the FFI [French Forces of the Interior, part of the Resistance]. Returning the next day with gifts of chocolate bars and life savers, the little kids “all little Judy’s . . . nestled up to the jeep —they don’t know any English word but ‘jeep’. . . They were yelling ‘L’Amerique!’ and crawled all over us.” In the letters home the Allies are always whipping Jerry, never discouraged, though they have to fight hard. The stories of close calls he saved for post war yarns. I remember one about being caught in an observation tower as a bomb went off at its base, another of being separated from the company and trapped in enemy territory for days. In these letters, though, the “Krauts” are “surrendering so fast they were loaded on trucks and sent in with just a driver and one guard for 50 prisoners.” A bedraggled German soldier comes out of the hedges with a white flag, “the doughboys signaled him to come on and we held fire. Imagine our surprise when a long column of others followed him out.” He reports on the resourcefulness of these rough soldiers in his unit. Back in Belgium, a town empty of all but “a few goats,” the platoon mechanic “found an old generator here in town, so he rigged up a belt, jacked up a wheel on a jeep, hitched up the generator to the wheel, so now we have electric lights in all our rooms.” And after

“raising hell with Jerry” there is fresh venison for dinner, though worry because the snows are coming strong (and frostbite did get his ear lobes in the Ardennes). He teases the family with reports of his 3-day relief trip to Paris, “not like when we breezed through at the invasion,” but seen instead for its “swell shows and bright lights.” “The girls had costumes best left to the imagination—you had to imagine them cause they just weren’t there.” Paris is, this American writes, “a glamorously beautiful city,” but with a “dreary and corrupt heart.”

But about half way through the letters this period movie becomes part of my own story, introduces the contingencies of my own existence, and I’m on edge.

“Feb 3, 1945 Germany” brings first mention that “my English girlfriend still writes twice, and sometimes 3 times a week, and a damned interesting letter she writes, too. She’s quite a bit younger than I am, but is a very mature person. . .”

Two weeks later, February 19, 1945, his casual-seeming, strategic comment concerning an “English girlfriend” is followed with a 10 page handdog disclosure: “I hardly know how to begin this letter . . . more of a confession and a prayer for forgiveness.” “Facing Jerry hasn’t bothered me but I’ve really been a coward in this matter.” And the story gradually comes out, the falling in love in Stafford a year before, the continued romantic correspondence from the Assault Training Center in Ilfracombe, her week-long visit “on her vacation” (would that have been from high school? it seems so. He is 32 by now) where they found time for courtship “even though I was on duty the entire time.” He assures them this is no “infatuation,” that he knows “loneliness plays tricks on a person’s heart.” “Here the frills and the glamor are stripped clean and only cold, logical reality makes sense.” There is something almost comical in his avowal that logic is guiding him to “love her very very much.” He lives in the world later described in *Catch-22*, after all. And soon enough “Fate,” not reason, is the master of his passion: “man’s destiny is controlled by hands other than his own,” he reflects. The “fearless” soldier is beside himself with dread that his desire to remarry will be viewed by his family as reckless or self-indulgent. “Please write right away and let me know how you feel about it all, because I will not have a peaceful moment until I hear.” As weeks go by without an answer, the letters waver between martial pride and domestic anxiety: “We are going great guns now, the Krauts are giving up in droves,” followed by “I do hope my keeping Marjorie a secret has not caused you to stop writing to me. I won’t think that, though because I know you want me to be happy, it’s probably just the rotten mail service.”

And indeed the “topsy-turvy mail” turns up two long delayed letters from Pilgrim Road. “I take my pen in hand to give you merry hell for harboring any

such illusions that you may have regarding our being peeved at you,” writes my Uncle Roy. And one from Aunt Ellen, March 29 reads: “Had a letter from Marjorie, written at the same time I wrote to her. I’m glad you have found such a nice girl and I hope it won’t be long before you are together again.” “There have been two false peace rumors lately,” Ellen continues, “and by the time this reaches you, it may be true that it is all over, on your side anyways. Ah, Chris, what will you do when you know it is really over? Will you yell and holler or bawl? I know I’ll cry like a baby.”

The war is indeed winding down. They are among the first Americans to cross the border into Germany. “We’ve crossed 2 rivers in 2 days which is some sort of record. I was the first one in the battalion to be across both since I lead to reconnoiter the positions, but no need to worry, Jerry only fired a few & they were way off.” This letter ends with a celebration—in a town they have captured they found “a whole store house of champagne” and “flushed with victory the officers are having a party in the house we are occupying.” Among the photographs that must have been inserted in these letters I find one marked “V-E Day”: “find the one that’s sober!”—four disheveled, leering men, arms holding each other up, a hand at each end displaying a shroud-length Nazi flag. (I remember that flag, sturdy crepe. We used it in the fifties for raking up the leaves in the yard. The strangeness of the ritual only dawns on me now.)

A few months later the occupation is official: “We are the military government for a radius of about 20 miles around here” he writes to Ellen. (As a trained scientist of that era he was fluent in German and thus able to serve as chief administrator of a German town.) But postwar ruins and chaos postpone the euphoria. “Civilians, discharged German soldiers, Russians, Italian, Yugoslavs, Polish prisoners of war, and a million and one displaced persons from all parts of Europe and every one of them come to us with their problems.” German officers, he writes, for all their wartime arrogance, are helpless and groveling before the chaos they have brought about. No wonder Americans after the war sometimes saw themselves as the only reliable grownups.

The next letter I find in the pile is in a different hand, unmistakably my mother’s plump and vertical scrawl (but more legible than her later style); her thoughts run ahead of the pen. From 4, Littleton Close, Myners St. Stafford. To “Mr. & Mrs. Costello. 45 Pilgrim Road, Marblehead. US America. April 12. “Thank you so much for your kind letter . . . as you can see it has been on the way a very long time. . . I imagine from your letter you have not received my letter as yet...” She searches for things to say to these new invisible in-laws, desperate to make a good impression. She talks about the lovely English spring, of England’s stone versus

America's wooden houses, of hopes that Chris will have a leave in England while it is lovely, as many American soldiers have (he will not, for many months), tells a bit of Staffordshire history under Norman lords, makes a plea for help when she takes up the duties of stepmother: "I feel just a little scared. . . I know so little of children... please help. . . you could make all the difference between success and failure." "I love England dearly but I am very excited about the prospect of seeing America. It is such a vast country that it quite takes my breath away to think about it." She is 18, the age I gave up pot for poetry, went off to college, and started to get serious about my education.

The O.E.D. cites 1941 as the year the noun "teenager" first came into print, but it would be the Fifties before it was in common use. Yet she is teen-aged and in her wide-eyed trembling style she hardly seems ready (if one ever could be) for marriage to a stranger, a widower with a small child, in a distant, unfamiliar land whose common language is an illusion. There are no bridges at all. She trusts him, no doubt, and believes in his promises. And her instincts were essentially right. But he is the innocent in many ways, the more romantic of the two. She always kept close counsel with herself as I was growing up, and must have known something, even then, and more even than he, though so much older, about a world "stripped clean of frills and glamor." She knew well enough from an adolescence of blackouts and scarcity and swarming evacuees, that all promises are human, all futures vulnerable; perhaps under his vows she heard what W.H. Auden heard as he emigrated to America:

A solitude ten thousand fathoms deep
Sustains the bed on which we lie, my dear:
Although I love you, you will have to leap;
Our dream of safety has to disappear. ("Leap Before You Look")

And leap she does. Another letter from Marjorie Embrough in August 1945, now from "Westminster Hospital Preliminary Training School, Oxfordshire" to Ellen Costello describes "a complete surprise" visit from Chris, "unbelievably good to see him again after such a long time and I am now quite convinced that the age of miracles cannot yet be over." She has only two days off from nursing duties, and while she is working he goes up to Stafford to see her parents. I figure these two could not have spent more than two or three months together, through the war, though he was overseas for more than a year and a half. Where are all his letters to her, I wonder? Thrown overboard with everything else when she finally pulled

anchor, or rather took flight, from her English life (the plane stopping in Goose Bay, Newfoundland! to refuel, and a terrible 3 day weather delay) arriving bedraggled in New York in March 1946, and straight to The Church of the Transfiguration, (“the Little Church Around the Corner,” where more than a dozen marriages got underway each week in 1945-6), with nothing but her mother’s refitted wool coat on her back, the lovely hat with the bird on it, her one indulgence in all the years of rationing, blown off in the Atlantic wind.

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