FORWARD, CHILDREN!

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Forward, Children!

by
Paul Alexander Bartlett

From the best-selling author of *When the Owl Cries*

FORWARD, CHILDREN!

Paul Alexander Bartlett

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Forward, Children! was published in 1998 in Korea, nearly a decade after the author's death. The author's literary executor, Steven James Bartlett, has decided to make the novel available as an open access publication, freely available to readers through Project Gutenberg under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs license, which allows anyone to distribute this work without changes to its content, provided that both the author and the original URL from which this work was obtained are mentioned, that the contents of this work are not used for commercial purposes or profit, and that this work will not be used without the copyright holder's written permission in derivative works (i.e., you may not alter, transform, or build upon this work without such permission). The full legal statement of this license may be found at

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OTHER BOOKS BY PAUL ALEXANDER BARTLETT

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TO THE YOUTH OF THE WORLD

Allons, enfants de la patrie,
Le jour de la gloire est arrivé!
–La Marseillaise

Forward, children of our country,
the day of glory is at hand.

Forward, Children!

by

Paul Alexander Bartlett

INTRODUCTION

Steven James Bartlett

Forward, Children! is a gripping anti-war novel. It brings vividly back to life the experience of WWII tank warfare as it was fought and endured by soldiers in the tank corps. The novel is also a story of love in French Ermenonville, where Rousseau lived during the last period in his life and was buried.

The title *Forward, Children!* comes from the opening line of *La Marseillaise*, the French national anthem (*Allons, enfants de la patrie*). *Forward, Children!* is a novel that was long in the making. Paul Alexander Bartlett completed the first manuscript of *Forward, Children!* in the years before the outbreak of the second world war. He had been deeply affected by the first world war, by the horrors and suffering it caused. Wishing to bring to readers a convincing and powerful first-hand experience of that war, he portrayed in the first version of *Forward, Children!* the hardship and terror of tank warfare as it had been conducted by the American Expeditionary Forces Tank Corps during World War I.

Renowned English novelist, poet, and critic Ford Madox Ford thought highly of *Forward, Children!*, and shortly before his death devoted a large part of an essay published in the *Saturday Review of Literature* to praise for the novel, urging its publication.

> "*Forward, Children!* ... is the projection of the life of a fighting soldier in the A. E. Tank Corps in France. It is so to the life that for some days after reading it, the writer's nights were rendered heavy by the return of the lugubrious dreams that for years after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles attended on his slumbers. When you read *Forward, Children!* you *are* in a tank crawling amidst unspeakable din and unthinkable pressure up the sides of houses, and down the banks of dried-up canals, crashing through the walls of factories.... [I]f not on artistic grounds then at least for the public weal this book should be published and widely circulated."

Ford Madox Ford died two weeks after this essay was published in 1939. In the subsequent years, with the attention of the world now fixed on WWII, Bartlett decided to rewrite *Forward, Children!* to portray tank warfare in the ongoing world war. He had already become knowledgeable about tank warfare in the first world war and he now researched the conditions and accounts of tank fighting in the second. As a result, *Forward, Children!* builds on the author's attempt to stand in the combat boots of the tank soldiers of both world wars and conveys to the reader an account of their experience with unforgettable realism.

Forward, Children! was ironically never published during the author's life, despite the strongest commendations the work received not only from Ford Madox Ford, but also from John Dos Passos, who remarked: "Praise from Ford Ma-

dox Ford is praise indeed. The descriptions of tank warfare are vivid and as far as I know unique. This is a very, very good novel."

Russell Kirk added his admiration for the novel: "Permit me to commend *Forward, Children!* The novel attains a pathos rare in war novels. The scenes of battle are drawn with power. Bartlett is an accomplished writer." Pearl Buck, Nobel Laureate in Literature, wrote: "He [Bartlett] is an excellent writer. *Forward, Children!* is an excellent piece of work, with fine characterizations."

Upton Sinclair wrote: "I found *Forward, Children!* extremely interesting and convincing. I think it is one of the best descriptions of fighting I have ever read. In fact, I can't remember any account of tank fighting in such detail and [which is so] convincing." James Purdy remarked: "*Forward, Children!* ranks with the best books–its anti-war message is inescapable. It is an important book and [Bartlett is] an important writer."

Forward, Children! eventually came to interest a small press in war-scarred Korea; in 1998, the press published the book in a limited edition that has reached few readers. To remedy this, the author's literary executor has decided to republish the book in open access form as an eBook to be made freely available to readers through Project Gutenberg.

Whatever the obstacles have been that so often stand in the way of authors, and that plague the world of publishing, after many, many decades it is time for *Forward, Children!* to reach its readers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Alexander Bartlett (1909-1990) was both a writer and an artist, born in Moberly, Missouri, and educated at Oberlin College, the University of Arizona, the Academia de San Carlos in Mexico City, and the Instituto de Bellas Artes in Guadalajara. His work can be divided into three categories: He is the author of many novels, short stories, and poems; second, as a fine artist, his drawings, illustrations, and paintings have been exhibited in more than 40 one-man shows in leading galleries, including the Los Angeles County Museum, the Atlanta Art Museum, the Bancroft Library, the Richmond Art Institute, the Brooks Museum, the Instituto-Mexicano-Norteamericano in Mexico City, and many other galleries; and, third, he devoted much of his life to the most comprehensive study of the haciendas of Mexico that has been undertaken.

Three hundred and fifty of his pen-and-ink illustrations of the haciendas and more than one thousand hacienda photographs make up the Paul Alexander Bartlett Collection held by the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection of the University of Texas, and form part of a second diversified collection held by the American Heritage Center of the University of Wyoming, which also includes an extensive archive of Bartlett's literary work, fine art, and letters. A third archive consisting primarily of Bartlett's literary work is held by the Department of Special Collections at UCLA. Bartlett's book about the history and life on the haciendas, including a selection of his illustrations and photographs, was published by the University Press of Colorado in 1990 under the title *The Haciendas of Mexico: An Artist's Record.*

Paul Alexander Bartlett's fiction has been commended by many authors, among them Pearl Buck, Ford Madox Ford, John Dos Passos, James Michener, Upton Sinclair, Evelyn Eaton, and many others. He was the recipient of numerous grants, awards, and fellowships, from such organizations as the Leopold Schepp Foundation, the Edward MacDowell Association, the New School for Social Research, the Huntington Hartford Foundation, the Montalvo Foundation, Yaddo, and the Carnegie Foundation. His novel *When the Owl Cries* received national acclaim; his fine art has been exhibited throughout the United States and in Mexico; his poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies and has been published in individual volumes of his collected poetry. Bartlett was very prolific and left to the archives of his work many as yet unpublished manuscripts, including poetry, short stories, and novels, as well as more than a thousand paintings and illustrations.

His wife, Elizabeth Bartlett, a widely published and internationally recognized poet, is the author of seventeen published books of poetry, more than one thousand individually published poems, numerous short stories and essays in leading literary quarterlies and anthologies, and, as the founder of Literary Olympics, Inc., served as the editor of a series of multi-language volumes of international poetry to honor the work of outstanding contemporary poets.

The author of this Introduction (Paul and Elizabeth Bartlett's only child)] apparently inherited their writer's gene and has published books and articles in the fields of philosophy and psychology.

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Forward, Children!

PORTRAIT

Orville Dennison was five feet eleven inches tall and weighed a hundred and fifty pounds. He had the body of an athlete, the body of a crewman and a tennis player.

His eyes were brown with flecks of grey in them. He had brown hair and combed it straight back and when it was long it bulged out on the sides and had waves that crossed from ear to ear, waves that were sun bleached on the top.

His nose was aquiline, his mouth was thin-lipped and rather small. He had large ears. His eyebrows were bushy and his lashes were long and thick. His forehead was broad but was not unusual except that it was very smooth while the skin of his face, which was rather florid, had enlarged pores here and there.

His hands were wide across the back and his fingers were strong; his shoulders and arms were muscular.

He walked quickly with a natural swing.

He had a ready smile and even teeth.

His voice was pleasant.

He was twenty-four.

One was struck by the sadness in his face, the careworn lines about his mouth and eyes.

1

Landel shook Dennison's shoulder.

"Whatcha want?" Dennison mumbled, raising himself on one elbow and unconsciously pushing aside his blanket.

"The supply trucks have come," Landel yelled.

"Who's come?"

"The trucks and tanks are here. Three trucks have brought supplies. We've got food. Are you awake? Hey, do you hear me?"

”What did you say? Sure, sure, I’m awake,” Dennison replied hazily. He squinted and ducked as Landel shot the beam of his flashlight directly into his face.

Landel knelt down beside Dennison and fumbled about the floor of the abandoned plank and sandbag irrigation shack for his tank helmet. His tall body almost filled the place. His bald head looked repulsively bald to Dennison–something surgical.

”I let ya sleep a little longer than the other guys,” Landel yelled. ”Yeah, you needed sleep.” He shifted his flashlight around the crude shack, over the mounds of blankets where their crewmates had been sleeping.

”Our kitchen’s here! The trucks are here ... three of them,” he repeated.

”We’ve got something hot to eat,” he hollered. ”Are you awake?” He pushed Dennison–shoved him against the floor. ”Come on, get out of here!”

”What time is it?” Dennison asked.

”Nearly fifteen ... we’ve got to get moving,” Landel crabbed. He found his helmet underneath a sandy, greasy blanket and stuck it on. ”Raub’s got here with his kitchen ... so, let’s go ... okay? Now?” He was talking to himself, spitting out words, annoyed by the day’s problems, war’s problems. He rose from his knees and, stooping low to keep from cracking himself against the roof, edged, crab-fashion, toward the door.

”I’m leavin’ ... I’m goin’,” he cried.

”I’ll be along in a minute,” Dennison said, yawning and propping himself against the wall, legs and shoulders feeling stiff.

Landel reappeared.

”Go on ... I’m awake!” he shouted. ”See you at the chuck wagon.”

”We’ve got to eat quick ... we’ve a hell of a lot to do,” Landel screamed, his head in the doorway. He zoomed his flashlight into Dennison’s eyes, like a warning, and walked off.

Angry, Dennison rubbed his hands over his bearded face, slumped down onto the floor again.

Through the doorway he caught glimpses of the flashlights and lanterns of men headed for the kitchen: legs and lights passed with metronome jerkiness across the sand: dust came up from beneath boots. Shellfire rumbled in the distance, a sound that had in it all the vacuity of the African desert.

A jab of wind dribbled sand through the doorway and shook sand from the make-shift roof of the shelter where only yesterday gunners had been trapped emplacing a gun.

Dennison smelled the stench of gasoline and grease from the tanks and a tank dump nearby; he could smell the gas and grease on his clothes; it seemed to swirl around him.

The incoming air was chilly.

Shivering, he hauled a blanket around him and with his shoulders against a sandbag, lit a cigarette. As his lighter flared he noticed his squashed, grease-pocked helmet; sleepily, he reached for it and placed it across his lap, pressing it down, making it a part of him. One hand holding his pack of cigarettes, the other bringing a cigarette to his mouth, he tried to think.

It seemed to him that he had dreamed during the night.

The tip of the cigarette glowed encouragingly.

Yes, he had dreamed about the library tower, the chimes, the sounds travelling down the hill slopes, down toward Lake Cayuga, the tower and the sounds blurring. Kids were sitting in the library, at long tables, faces, faces. There seemed to be an elm tree at the far end of the reading room, snow, lake ...

He tried to remember the sound of those chimes.

Huddled against sandbags, he drowsed and as he drowsed he saw a campfire in the woods somewhere, students standing around the fire, some of them singing. A guy was playing his harmonica, muting his music by cupping both hands over the instrument ...

Dennison's arms and hands had fallen asleep.

Yesterday the pace across the desert had been formidable, the heat increasing, a shortage of water, the water warm and sickening, nothing at all to eat at noon ...

He shook his hands and arms to bring back the circulation, groaning, cold, the exhaust of a tank stinking and coughing nearby. The sound brought with it the sensation of violent pitching, the distress of gasoline and oil fumes, the threat of shellfire at close range.

Shoving his sweater inside his trouser, adjusting his belt, he knelt and fished about: his helmet had rolled heedlessly and bumped against the wall: recovering it, he strapped it on, tilting it over his forehead, aware of its grime.

Slipping on his leather jacket, yanking the zipper, he wormed about the blankets for his mess kit and stepped out into the open, feeling sand drop off his clothes.

Outdoors, his cigarette tasted better and he inhaled deeply to help wake up. The chilly air nipped his face and hands, as he stood motionless urinating.

Behind the shack rose a tangle of rusty machinery from an irrigation pump, the machinery snarled over a cannon-sized conduit, the pipe's mouth toward the sky. The stars seemed closer because of the junked pipes and gears: the sky, utterly cloudless, was defiant: in a few hours its sun would be hammering, leading on and on, sand gobbling sand, dunes blurring into hills: heat and flies would move it together, thirst would be everywhere.

A G.I. scuffed by, coughing and spitting.

”Raub’s here,” he called, noticing Dennison and his cigarette. ”We’re ready to eat!” He coughed again.

Dennison wet his lips with his tongue and swallowed.

”I’m right behind you,” he said. ”Wait a second ... I’ve got my flashlight. Here, Millard!”

He pulled his flash from his jacket pocket and walked behind his crewmate–the sand deep, their boots scuffing, the flashlight wobbling as if asleep.

”Gonna get hot today,” Millard hollered.

”Can’t hear you,” Dennison hollered.

”Any news on the radio?”

”What was it you said?”

Raub had his kitchen under lopsided leafless trees and a scabby fire of branches burned close to it, kitchen and blaze hidden behind a dune, an enormous crested thing with skeletal brush and camel grass growing on its side. Gaunt, set off by stars, it threatened the kitchen and men, hung, swollen, a thing of unbelievable weight. Yellow light crept up the slope and bounced off the scarred steel of the field kitchen. Steam gushed from pots at the rear of the stove; the air smelled of coffee and hash.

His flashlight in his pocket, Dennison worked his way through sixty or eighty men, brushing sand out of a mess kit with a dirty handkerchief and the palm of his hand. It seemed to him that he had done this many times.

”Hi,” he greeted one of the Corps.

”Hi, Dennison ... Hi. Goddamn desert, cold. Freeze off your ass.” The man drained his coffee and then blew into the bottom of his cup. ”Coffee’s good,” he said.

”Give me a cup of coffee,” Dennison said to Raub, at the kitchen: Raub had his coffee pot raised for pouring, his face smudged, his eyes puttied with sleep; cups were scattered along the kitchen counter in front of him, some of them clean.

”Howdy, any news from you guys?” Raub asked, tilting the pot, arm extended across the counter, the pot steaming. He smiled at Dennison, liking him: Dennison reminded him of a fellow back home, in Atlanta, a boy he’d grown up with.

”You ought to know the news,” Dennison said, ”you just came in with your outfit, so what’s the news? What’s up?”

”Not a damn thing! Here, hold still, have some hash. Hungry? It’s not bad stuff.”

”Sure,” Dennison said.

”Fill’er up,” Millard said, behind Dennison. ”I could eat anything!”

The Corpsmen wore regulation uniforms or the coveralls of the mechanic;

there were a number in fatigues; some men wore helmets; they were an unshaven lot. Their khaki did not count for much: they were all of a piece: their greasy, oily, gasoline messed clothes stuck to their greasy, oily bodies; they had not washed in days. No water, no inclination.

They appeared strangely alike in the firelight, each with a bush on his face, each with a crew cut or helmet, each with his mess kit or cup of coffee.

A shell thudded behind the great dune.

"Hell, I hope they don't lay a line on this fire," Millard said, moving a few yards away from the kitchen to allow others to queue up.

His pan filled, Dennison stepped out of line and pushed his way through the crewmen.

"Captain Meyers had guys pull some of the wood out of the blaze," a fat sergeant told Dennison.

"They're not near enough for a hit," Dennison belched cheerfully, spooning some hash.

"Christ, there's a village burning up over there, beyond that dune," somebody yelled. "What's a piddling campfire alongside a village! We'll be out of here in an hour. It'll be our turn to let them have it!"

Dennison found a hollow and sat down on a dead tree, a palm, a frondless bole; shoes sliding into the sand, he resumed eating, spooning and chewing slowly, listening to the men talk, noticing the stars now and then. The pan burned pleasantly in his hand and he shifted it about and spooned another spoonful of hash, his mouth sticking out, his nose in the steam.

On one side of him, Millard was shouting:

" ... Why, you know the drag of those cylinders, the lousy combustion; why, man alive, the Panzer tanks withstand the desert heat a hell of a lot better than our machines. Why..."

Somebody was yelling for more hash.

Somebody beefed:

"We've got fifteen Sherman tanks in reserve ... I'll bet we never use them!"

Dennison was familiar with some of the voices and the familiarity helped: the fire was encouraging: the hash was really hot: there was more at the chuck wagon. Coffee too.

Yesterday ... he tried to shut off the memory as he would a tap, but memory trickled through: Jesus, the vast terrain they had covered, that whamming through the sand, screwing round to avoid rocks, ducking behind a dune, climbing to fall into the direct fire of a Panther, her guns blazing ...

Luck, nothing but luck had pulled them out of that jam.

You never could tell, maybe they would have a lucky break today ... maybe it wouldn't get too hot inside the bus; maybe there might be enough water, stuff

that was fit to drink ... they could travel across some comparatively level ground, none of the loose sand to baulk the treads. And food? Maybe they'd have something to eat, a chance to eat outside the tank.

It was a wretched kind of hope, the same hope that everyone got up with every morning–but it was hope. Gazing at the smoke from the fire, he followed it upward where the sky was a thousand stars, no New York sky; even through the smoke the points blinked brightly. Coldly. He held a mouthful of coffee on his tongue before he tackled his food once more. The bread was fresh. Good crust. He felt his body lose a little of its weariness; one leg sank into the sand; probably the desert was not too bad in the winter time, at some oasis, town or city.

He signalled to Isaac Jacobs who was wandering through the crowd of crewmen, walking sleepily, balancing his heaped up mess kit, coffee cup in the midst of the hash. Zinc's beard shone weirdly, crazily red in the light. He pushed his way past a couple of gesturing men and stepped on a smoldering log someone had dragged from the campfire.

"Goddammit," he exclaimed, wobbling, balancing. "Almost got myself badly singed. Gotta watch where we step in this desert." His teeth flashed in a grin intended for Dennison. Dennison grunted and nodded, his mouth full, his eyes narrowed to friendly slits.

"Sit down on the tree."

"How goes it?" Zinc asked, sitting, his mess kit on the trunk alongside.

"Not bad. Any news?"

"Sure, Raub shorted me on hash and bread–that's news!" Zinc said, spooning food.

"I heard Chuck say that a unit of the 604th is trailing us; somebody picked up their radio."

"I wouldn't mind seein' ole Sutter and Reynolds again," Zink said, sopping hash onto a lump of bread, bowing his legs around his kit.

The fire was sparking and sending out low flames: for several minutes the dune came nearer, seemed taller, more ominous. When the flames flared the dune retreated.

Zinc's face, because of his beard, appeared round and oriental; a hint of satire, of his good humor, was apparent as he chewed and watched the fire, the coming and going men. His hair, badly cut, trimmed by a madman, was greasy, in contrast to his scrubbed whiskers. He was built like a jockey–small boned, and lightly muscled. Staring at Dennison, he rolled his chocolate eyes expressively.

"This stuff, this hacked up meat, is easier to eat than the gunk they fed us yesterday," he said. "A pan of salmon's not my idea of chow in the desert."

"Yeah, it was lousy," Dennison agreed.

"I'm gettin' me more of this hash, when I'm done."

”Sure ... there’s plenty.”

”Raub got here plenty early...”

”Great logistics ... I’ll have more hash before the flies move in,” said Dennison.

”Flies ... flies ... they’re everywhere when we stop ... a fine way to go to hell ... carried there by flies!”

”How’s your stomach?” Dennison asked. ”Any better this morning?”

Yesterday, at a noon halt, Zinc had held to a tread and vomited, gasping, his face white above his beard. During the morning run he had been hurled against the stock of his machine gun.

”I’m doin’ all right,” Zinc said ”My guts have settled into place–somehow. Maybe the muscles inside are knittin’ together again or whatever. I can breathe okay. No pain.”

He chuckled faintly. ”It was one hell of a rotten jolt, and came near puttin’ me out of running. I think this food will stay down.”

”You’ll be okay,” Dennison said.

Zinc flaunted a hunk of bread.

”As long as I can eat I can manage,” he exclaimed.

The fire had attracted more of the Corps; some sat on the palm tree; two perched on a bed roll; others squatted on the sand; several sat on oil drums; some ate with their backs to the flames; others loafed about the kitchen. When Raub waved a mess kit and yelled, Dennison got up and crossed the sand to the wagon.

”More hash ... more coffee,” he said, offering his pan.

”Sure man,” said Raub.

Dennison stared at him while he spooned hash, sliced bread, and poured coffee: he was a far off guy, slow, sloppy, small, with black rimmed spectacles and a black wad of a moustache, the image of a grubby Parisian painter though he had never painted or been outside of Georgia until the war.

”Did you have a tough time, bringing the kitchen forward?” Dennison shouted.

”Yeah ... bad findin’ you guys in the black ... bad truck ... but weah heah.”

To Dennison he sounded unreal: where the hell was Georgia? Where was the US? All these men ... here ... how had they gotten here? The dune became real but the conflict was unreal.

Settling his cup on the kit he asked himself whether he should eat more? What about being wounded on a full belly? Was it worse with the belly full? Some said....

”Heah, heah,” said Raub. ”I’ve got some sinkahs for you. Would you all like a couple?”

”Huh ... I guess so...”

Raub opened a cupboard door–a stainless steel door in the side of his kitchen–and pulled out a cellophane bag and passed doughnuts to Dennison, one at a time, hooked over a finger.

Dennison grinned.

”Good boy, Raub.”

”Mum’s da word. Quick, hide’em, while we’re alone.” Raub frowned, imagining GI’s storming over the sand, howling for doughnuts across the counter. ”Jus’ remember, when your folks sends you all some stuff, jus’ remember me again.”

”I’ll remember.”

Dennison returned to Zinc and munched a doughnut underneath his nose–sitting down beside him.

”See how it’s done!”

”How’d you rate that?”

”Reach in my jacket ... there’s another sinkah ... you all likes ’em.”

Zinc appreciated Dennison’s fake accent, fished for the doughnut, and bit into it.

”Perfect.”

Hunkered on the tree, they finished their food and drank more coffee. They stopped talking. Dennison lit a cigarette and offered his pack to Zinc, who accepted one. They had stopped talking because of fear. Fear was in the cigarette. In the sand.

”Landel was nervous as hell yesterday,” Dennison began. ”He acted as if the whole Africa Korps was on him!” He remembered Landel bellowing over the tank intercom, storming about supplies. Using the radio he screamed at officers, berating them when they answered.

”Operation haywire,” Zinc commented, recalling the outburst.

”Colonel Morris says he’ll report Landel ... Landel was drunk on Monday ... well, hell, we need a break,” he said, wanting a leave, a week, two weeks, a month away from the assaults. Let some other guy knife his way through the Anadi pocket. Let some other crew hammer at the men entrenched at Anadi. Anadi was nothing. Never could mean anything.

”Morris is bad,” Zinc said. ”He couldn’t take it yesterday, couldn’t talk some of the time. One of his men got shot through the head. Their tank conked out ... a faulty timer.”

Again they stopped talking, already feeling the heat of their bus, the perspiration drenching their legs and arms and backs; they felt the lunging of their machine; they heard the sob of the motor, the bang of pistons, the bark of the exhaust.

Fear slid down the dune, sat with them, picked at the grains of sand, shuffled

through the dying fire, rubbed their faces, old fear, present before every attack.

They heard the far off shelling, felt it in their feet.

A nerve began to tremble in Dennison's right hand.

He looked at his hand, stared.

He thought of the little village of Ermenonville, his E, thought of his years there, his aunt's home, those gawky French windows in grey stone walls; he thought of his uncle's writing desk in his room upstairs, a desk usually littered with maps and photos and calculations–pigeonholes ready to burst.

As he peered at the sand under his shoes he saw the fishing tackle in his own room ... rod and gun rack. He could almost see the park at E, the oaks, ash, chestnut, willow ... the miniature island where Rousseau had been buried ... the Petit Lac reflected the tall Lombardies on the island ... a swan–swimming sedately–was part of the scene ... the ivy walled château.

Millard sat on the tree trunk, yakking, repeating rumors, speculating: each man had something to say about the terrain that was ahead: unfolding a map, some went over the lay of the land together. Wiping their mess kits half way clean with handfuls of sand they tossed them into a bin behind Raub's kitchen.

By now the fire was out.

Flashlights bloomed and died. Lanterns blinked.

Seated men, men standing in groups, became death figures.

Dennison walked slowly, head bent; Zinc followed him; Millard followed.

Their tank was parked among other machines behind the shack where they had slept, almost at the base of the great dune. The bulk of each tank was something cut out of the night. As Dennison popped on his flash, rocks and gravel mixed with the deep sand ruts left by the treads.

A mechanic's spotlight had been trained on their M4 Sherman: she was a dusty blob twenty-four feet long, nine feet wide and eleven feet high. Paint had been chipped off innumerable places. Her starboard side had sunk down where the sand had given way under her weight. She weighed thirty-five tons, and carried three machine guns, a 75 mm turret cannon. Walking up to her, Dennison kicked sand off his shoes against the armor plating.

"Where in Christ's name have you been?" Landel screamed, appearing out of the dark, flashlight in hand.

"Just finished eating," Dennison yelled.

"Here's your helmet," Landel yelled. "I found it lyin' on the floor of the bus. My god, man, can't you keep anything! You bastards always lose our stuff."

"I'm wearing my helmet," Dennison yelled. "That's Zinc's helmet."

Landel's flashlight winked out; the mechanic's vivid spotlight went out; the darkness seemed to alter the tone of the captain's voice, make it more irritable:

"Who the hell's dickering with that light? What's the matter! This is no

blackout! Gotta check!”

He stumbled across sand ruts, his flash poking the sand and rocks. In a matter of seconds the mechanic’s light snapped on. Dennison had climbed on top of their tank when Landel returned. Landel grabbed his leg and yelled:

”Dennison, you and Zinc carry our quota of 75 mms and all the stuff you can lug. Snap into it! We’ve got to get out of here; we’ve a hell of a lot to do before we can pull out. Millard,” he screamed: ”MILLARD, Milla-ard. Grab yourself! Go with Zinc. Go with Dennison. Bring mms to our tank. I’ll be inside ... you can feed it to me.”

The three walked away, avoided a blown-up tree and its branches. Tricky, bombed sand sent Zinc pitching on his belly. He got up with a grunt, not a word. Their bearded faces leered at each other in the winking light; a halftrack blocked their way; the wind was coming up and slapped dust at them as they snaked along one behind the other.

”A rotten place to lug supplies,” Millard snapped. ”Why not move our bus and then pick up the shells?”

Shadowy light remained on Millard’s face: how old he had become: Millard Evans, twenty-six, now a middle-aged farm hand, face seamed, ugly. His mouth was too big, flabby, because he had lost several front teeth. Only the eyes were young, kind, normal.

”Here ... over here, here’s the dump,” Dennison said. His flash yellowed boxes of ammunition and supplies spread on a giant tarpaulin.

”Let’s not drag the stuff ... gotta keep sand off those boxes ... you know what that could mean!”

”Had sand in my gun yesterday,” Zinc said. ”Couldn’t swivel it for awhile.”

Working fast, they lugged mm, cannon shells, gasoline, water tins, cans of grease and oil. Someone got the idea of ripping tarpaulin and wiping off the machine gun cartridges before lugging them. The path to the tanks became crowded; the sand got very loose; lights stabbed the junked sand, scraped the dune’s side and seemed to drag down more sand, more dust, more darkness.

The three greased their stauffers and rollers and cleaned the cab. Dennison filled transmission grease cups, the cups of the stuffing box, and those of the bevel-gear case. He checked fuel lines for leakage. Starting the motor, revving it, he glanced at his wristwatch again and again: the radium dial obsessed him, tension mounting with the jerk-jerk of the second hand, the thudding of the motor ...

Outside, he bumped into Chuck Hitchcock, his hulky body coming out of the night, his helmet yanked low: Chuck was the youngest crewmate.

”Here, help me,” he exclaimed, handing Dennison a wrench.

”Okay, where?”

Chuck's handsome blond features expressed great pain: he resented the war, he hated Libya; he hated the tanks; the old happy days had been his boyhood days in Wisconsin, on his dad's farm. Agilely, he jumped onto a sand layered tread, motioning Dennison to come.

He had found a cracked plate and together they fought to remove it or replace it. Everything they touched was sandy; sand spat at them, rasped their hands, got into their mouths, abraded their knees as they knelt on the steel.

A sliver of steel jabbed Dennison's hand; he smashed savagely at a bolt with his wrench; a shell boomed among the machines; there was an enormous rattle of steel as gravel and rocks struck steel; men shouted; sand ripped from the great dune; smoke shut off the sky.

"They've got a line on us," Chuck yelled. "Lights out ... lights out!"

We're in for it now, Dennison thought. Something went wrong: we're always blundering, blundering ... the Nazis are supposed to be miles away from here:

"Climb inside, Chuck ... we can go!"

Dennison tightened the bolt, checked another.

Stripping off his jacket, wiping his hands on it, he climbed inside, the chill interior amazingly dark and foul with gasoline. Another shell struck, banging furiously. Darkness meshed with silence! Someone flipped on the cab lights; Dennison jazzed the motor, Landel dove inside; Millard was okay; Zinc was bolting the turret; the cab light went out, leaving behind the pure black of steel.

Shellfire was constant now, rocking the tank: the steel walls became paper partitions, likely to bend inward, collapse at any moment.

In his driver's seat, Dennison adjusted his driving slits, Landel beside him, unfolding his map, spreading it across his legs by flashlight.

During a jab of silence Dennison thought over the route briefed for them the day before: starboard, around the great dune; northeast by road for six kilometers; then north: was that right? Well, he could rely on Captain Fred Landel's directions.

Bolted inside, the cab light seemed something pitiful, sick and trapped; then a bulb flashed on at the rear, muscling the naked shoulders and waists of the crew, glazing the unstacked shells. Somebody coughed over the intercom. The rear light got doused; another bulb popped on where Chuck was working at a bolt on his gunnery seat, tilting the pad to a new angle. Millard, squatting on the floor, was wiping shell cartridges with an oiled rag. On the port side, Zinc swung his machine gun from left to right, his beard level with the gun, bristling, crazy.

With lights extinguished, the walls, the roar, the stink of gas and oil crammed the men. Dennison shifted the powerful Chrysler motor into second and swung away from the great dune. Although the cooling fan was rotating,

the engine had already heated the cab.

Dennison glanced at his wristwatch.

Darkness, viewed from inside the rocking Sherman, from inside steel, appeared blacker: it had the appearance of glass, a sheet of tinted Plexiglas. A shell, exploding in the distance, resembled a fake dawn. Pushing down with his palms, Dennison gripped the clutch levers. Feeling jailed, stunned, he eyed first the left port and then the right. He expected a signal and blinked to keep his eyes focused, swiping his face to stay alert.

Some sort of communication was coming in over the radio.

Rocks tilted the machine; Dennison shifted gears to ease the treads; as the bus jolted over rocks he flooded the engine and it snorted and backfired and spat into the dark. Carefully he coaxed the engine into third and fourth, down-shifting into second.

Now a green signal bobbed in front indicating: turn, to port. In time the light became a code, and Dennison read it painfully: it read: *armored attack ... small.*

He jabbed Landel's arm and Landel jabbed him back: their prearranged signal for mutual understanding. Connecting his phone, Dennison yelled:

"Okay ... attack ... where they attacking from?"

"I'll try the radio," Landel shouted.

Light was papering the horizon with its desert paper, how ancient, how wrinkled that flap of sand: good, to get out of that black stuff, can pilot this box: there are tanks to starboard, not bad!

As Dennison watched the creep of dawn a flare ripped the sky and hung suspended, rocking, kicking, sucking everything inside its brilliance.

Instantly, he spotted a Nazi gun, mounted on a dune-rise, a silhouette of men and gun, the flare exploding behind the gunners. He shouted at Landel but a shell blew up beside the Sherman and hurled it half around. Dennison toppled from his seat–the air knocked out of his lungs. He thought: We're hit ... we'll catch on fire! Back at his controls, he cut the racing motor and wobbled out of the line of fire, Landel babbling incoherently over the intercom.

Another shell.

"Port side ... port!" Landel yelled.

The treads caught, slipped, jerked, the M4 flopping from side to side; the rumble of the treads, rolling unevenly, drowned the shellfire. Their grinding was like the beating of pneumatic hammers on metal sheets. It seemed to the crew that the interior darkness became part of the noise, whirled around with it, cyclotronic, snagging thought and muscle.

Dennison's signaller appeared and led the tank to a strip of packed sand behind a lofty dune; he leaned forward to relieve a cramp in his side and wet his

lips with his tongue, craving a drink. A shell boomed. The signaller said *stop*.

They're waiting for dawn, Dennison thought.

I've got to rest a little ... got to have some water.

Unable to speak, he tapped Landel's shoulder and indicated his mouth: lights in the cab flickered on Landel's face, his twisting lips.

"Okay," Dennison heard on the phone.

As he drank and sensed the cool decency of water, he was afraid, afraid he would never have another drink, never get out, never have a chance to walk through fields or woods, stoop to cup water from a stream ...

The darkness, the waiting, the crash of shells, the steel: it was both pain and the unknown.

His hand shook as he gave the canteen to Landel.... Strange, dark inside but growing light outside.

He had wandered through a low ceilinged cave as a boy, on the heels of a guy who carried a dim lantern ... this was another cave, a cave that moved. He shivered from the heat and his dripping sweat. Sweat trickled along his arms, down the inside of his forearms and into his palms.

With his port visor open he watched the dawn: it would soon free him from the signaller's microscopic dot. He wet his lips with his tongue and eased against his seat.

Someone was jabbering on the phone; the radio was wheezing instructions; Landel was yelling ...

The quiet was uncanny, no motor running, no shellfire: Dennison knew that he dozed: he glanced at his wristwatch nervously; he glanced through his slit across the desert, across slab after slab of unfamiliar ground where yellow light exposed columns of dust: tanks or trucks were there, rolling north: dust, sand, heat, rolling heat, rolling sand and dust.

Zinc was talking to Chuck on the phone.

"There's our signal!" Landel yelled.

"Let's go," Chuck called.

A shell dumped a spout of sand that became a ragged blur, it was grey inside the tank now; the faces of the crew were grey; grey clouds hung in the morning light.

Zinc was thinking of Ohio, dawdling on a quiet elm street; Millard was shoving at the gum around a painful tooth: the thing had to be extracted. Fred Landel had his palms palmed over his eyes, his brain shut out; Chuck had thrown his shirt around his shoulders, knotted the sleeves around his neck.

Dennison jockeyed the engine, thinking:

If I could go to Bizerte and lie in bed and sleep ... could write a letter ... I should ...

He felt the treads digging in; they tossed sand to the rear; the bus rolled through a wadi, climbed into the sun that was burning ahead. Something in the rocking motion, the rise and fall, made him feel that he was driving over the bodies of wounded men. He seemed to see across treeless fields, across horizons, across Africa, across Europe, across Asia–into a snowland: there was time to ride through forests, time to ski …

Shell flames seared his thoughts.

He wanted to swing back, put the Sherman into reverse, turn, rush toward the rear–retreat. He wanted to open a steel door, jump out, run, blunder away from the din, away from the stench of gas and oil.

Landel scribbled something on his knee pad and handed it to Dennison. As Landel yelled on the radio transmitter, Dennison bent over the scrawl and forced his brain to come together and make sense:

Entering Anadi–Armed Corps.

What was Anadi?

Dennison had to jerk his machine away from an abutment of rocks; then it was smooth going: he shot the bus into faster gear: they were rolling at forty: they got to fifty, the heat mounting, billowing.

They were in formation with other tanks in their Corps.

Visibility: a hundred miles.

Blank sand.

Rolling.

He heard somebody open fire with a machine gun: it was Zinc: then their 75 pounder whammed into action.

Landel signalled *slow*.

Dennison observed a tank to starboard, tank inside a cloud of dust and sand; the tank began zigzagging; the machine on the port side was driving straight ahead. He opened his visors to better vision. For seconds he watched his compass dial.

North-north east …

Chickens flapped wildly along a street.

Anadi, appearing out of sand, was a cluster of mud huts, brick huts, doors sagging on leather hinges, scraped white walls, white roosters, bashed dome, a toppling minaret, more Libyan dust. From a brick compound, pierced by a jagged hole, a cannon fired at the Sherman, spreading smoke and yeasty light into the street.

A radio tower, designed like a potato masher, appeared through smoke and dust. A shell made the Sherman swivel. Lights failed inside. Dennison rolled forward slowly. The lights went on. Dennison had a moment to catch a glimpse of tiled roofs, barred windows, a bleached garden with broken benches, a dead

woman. A pair of dogs dove through an open doorway. The door shut.

Where was the cannon, firing out of the compound? Dennison coaxed his bus over cobbles, over a low barricade, close to a white wall; there a poster displayed a veiled woman, smiling. God, he thought, are there really women here?

Maybe I can get a drink ... rest ... maybe ... maybe eat ...

Smoke choked the street, brown smoke, acrid: it filled the space from house to house, street side to street side: it seemed to be working its way between the cobbles.

Dennison's eyes slid over his indicators, oil gauge, gas gauge, temperature, compass, ammeter, water gauge.

He tried to remember how many of their tanks were supposed to converge on Anadi but a shell crashed on the thought: he held his mouth open, expecting another detonation. The treads scrambled over bricks, smashed a door, travelled on paving, zigzagged, knocked down fence posts.

The ventilation fan seemed to have stopped.

Dust increased.

It was steel, desert, shells, more steel.

Can't see through the goddamn dust ... why doesn't it clear up? Christ, how my shoulders ache! What have they got in this rotten little town that we need so badly?

Twenty tanks, thirty tanks in this town ...

Now, now I can see. Okay, we push ahead ... okay go ...

A streetcar lay on its side–broken glass everywhere. Every house window was shuttered. Doors had been boarded over, were padlocked or x'd with planking as if the war could be shut out. White flags fluttered on roof tops–dirty white rags. Sandbags, with Egyptian lettering on them, leaned against an iron fence that leaned against a damaged truck. Nazi dead lay on paths in a circular rose bed, flowers tangled around their arms and legs, around rifles and helmets. Flowers. Bushes.

A lifeless dog lay in front of the Sherman and reminded Dennison of a dog he had owned in E, a brown dog: here Tubby, here Tubby. Dog eager to lick your hands and grin. Cocker. Here Tubby.

The treads of the tank spun over gravel: Zinc's machine gun destroyed an emplacement on a roof: Millard's gun mowed down three men, rushing along an alley.

Landel signalled and they rumbled along another alley and the cannon blew apart the front of a store where Nazi gunners were firing. Above a dome, perhaps a mosque, a shell burst, hurling bricks and stucco over doors, the Sherman and along a street.

Dennison jazzed the bus down a wide street and townspeople fled … ten or twelve on one side, bunched together, men and women, their clothing white and blue; their turbans white. Landel swung his machine gun to kill them: several dropped, a youngster, a boy, stumbled into the gutter, and lay there.

Spitting on the tank wall, Landel cursed them:

You goddamn sons of bitches … why the hell are you out in the street … don't you know no better?

Even with all the ports open the air inside the cab writhed. Gun powder stung their eyes and throats. The crewmen's faces were haunted. They stared out of ports and slits, leered, grimaced, mad, incredulous, exhausted, hungry, thirsty, deaf.

Dennison saw the sun directly ahead as the prow wrenched upward …

Somewhere, sometime, he must do something about the sky, study it, understand its composition, figure out how it originated, whether it altered at night, how it was influenced by storms, changes in temperature.

Only a week ago Al had died on one of the morning attacks: Landel had bellowed through the intercom: he had seen Al crash onto the floor: they had wanted to lug him outside, into the air, but he had died in Dennison's arms, his head saturated with blood, a bullet in his brain.

Yeah, Al had liked the sky. They had talked about it. He liked the sun. Al had wanted to buy a farm, have some horses and a cow. Horses not cars. He had talked about horses at camp: they had been buddies at Camp Manley. Yeah, they had put in days together, fishing at a nearby pond, hiking through Texas fields … bluebonnets….

Dennison observed other tanks: M3's and M4's, on a side street, the machines parked one behind the other, the crews still inside. A signal Corps flag appeared in the doorway of a two story building. A Corps flag wagged on a roof. Dennison drove his bus into a treeless square, and stopped, settled deeper into his seat, and asked Landel for the canteen.

As he drank, he read Landel's scrawl:

Stay!

In another section of Anadi, shells were gutting, lofting smoke, sand and dust.

The canteen water sent a chill through Dennison; a fleck of London hovered behind his eyes, streets with trees, fog, people waiting for a double-decker, kids leaning over a bridge rail, Big Ben, the grey Thames flowing … he thought of Al again: Al had been twenty-three, a graduate of Western Reserve: the bullet had torn his …

Landel checked the gas gauge.

Okay, gasoline.

Suddenly, they were off, a tank almost in front of Dennison, a tank toward the rear. At the first intersection, they separated, to mop up. A barricade had been erected on a street between low, white walls; there were trees to one side, delicate plumes of tamarisk, tamarisk in a row–trying to beat the desert and its heat.

Again every window was shuttered, even second floor windows. Grey shutters. Mauled shutters. Paintless.

Nobody was defending the barricade. The treads moaned over sandbags and piles of masonry. As Dennison topped the barricade a Nazi tank opened fire, firing head-on, a squad of infantrymen armed with Brens squeezed together behind it.

The tank's swastika burned in Dennison's brain: he spun his bus to the left, increased speed, shot ahead, cut to the right; he yelled through the intercom to Chuck, ordering him to open fire. Chuck's 75-pounder boomed. Dennison tried to signal Landel but grew confused. Why was the Nazi tank motionless? Was it some sort of trick?

Again he swung his tank to one side and then spurted forward as fast as she would roll. If the commander of the German bus was stalling, what the hell was he figuring?

Chuck steadied his gun–his body a part of it: steady boy, steady. Look, the Nazi turret is revolving. Wait, Chuck heard Landel's command to let go. As Dennison pivoted the Sherman, he pulled the trigger.

The 75 pounder hit the Nazi prow and threw the tank to one side. Millard fed another shell to Chuck. The Nazi dropped a shell behind the Sherman: it exploded so close its force threw Landel to the floor. Smoke drenched the ports. Chuck's gunfire tore open the Panther's armor plate and ripped off a tread and port gun–gapping the machine.

The infantrymen, with their Brens, froze: they still expected help from their smashed tank: they signalled each other and began to fan out as Dennison stared, his bus motionless. The sun was beating down: the smoke was clearing: dust was rolling up from somewhere: pigeons flew low: like a Hollywood prop the antenna mast on the Panther bent, and then collapsed onto the cobbles.

Landel was first to come to:

He whirled his machine gun on the half petrified infantrymen: he was too fast and depressed the barrel and bullets clattered across cobbles and rubble. Some of the soldiers crouched behind the tank. Others ran. A man fell. Then no soldiers: they had melted away.

Dennison tried to follow them and then returned to the square where other M4's were parked, near a small stone fountain and several olive trees.

Now, he thought ... I can rest ... get outside ... some water ... wet my face

… walk … eat …

Egging himself outside, he stumbled to the fountain where GI’s were standing, and splashed water on his face; removing his helmet, he splashed his head, staring into the shallow white tiled pool. A single fish was swimming: or was it a trick of the mind? Alive? Or coloration? And that bubble: were there still bubbles in the world?

He splashed his face again, the tank forgotten.

Water, air, trees, a grey-grey something, a gnarled something!

A lizard scuttled up a branch, stopped, flicked its tail, puffed its body, and stared inquisitively.

A cat slunk out of a bombed house and crossed the square and brushed against a GI, meowing, wobbling.

”I’ll be damned … a mangy cat,” croaked Zinc, his hands in the fountain: he flopped water over his face and soaked his shirt.

Dennison heard Zinc’s words faintly: it would be hours before the tank deafness wore off.

More crewmen milled around, jostling, swearing. A fat guy pounded Landel on his back as though he had won the war: he had seen Landel’s bus knock out the Nazi machine. Landel pointed overhead. Planes roared by; low on the horizon, a dozen Fortresses crawled through a dusty sky.

Dennison picked up the cat and stroked it.

As the line of men washed and drank, a boy scuttled from one of the houses, carrying a clay bottle of water: he offered it to the men nervously, speaking French, talking jerkily, as if something had injured his tongue. He could not get it into his head that the crewmen were temporarily deaf; his mother had told him they might not understand his French; he thought that was the trouble.

Dennison drank from his bottle–cool, cool.

He explained that the Corpsmen were deaf; then, as Dennison handed back the bottle, the boy began to shout and point: he indicated the roof of one of the buildings across the square.

”Look, Monsieur … look, on the roof … the roof of the mayor’s house! See! There’s machine gun … it’s pointed this way! Maybe somebody can … see, the gun is moving … they’re getting ready.”

Dennison had difficulty understanding the boy’s jargon; when he got it straight he yelled at the nearest crewmen. The warning spread. Someone at the fountain, a skinny guy in oily jeans, raced across the square and lobbed a grenade.

It fell short. At once the gunmen fired.

A bullet chipped Dennison’s arm, and the waterboy dropped, Millard fell, slumping heavily against the basin of the fountain; the cat scampered for shelter, leaves fell from the olive trees.

Seconds later, another grenade wiped out the roof gun and gunners ... planes roared overhead ... Millard was dead; the water-boy lay motionless ... Zinc began bandaging Dennison's arm.

Two minutes, or was it three? Or five?

"It's nothing," Dennison objected. "I'm okay. We'd better see about the kid."

"I know it's not bad ... a nick. Hold still!" Zinc yelled.

They were crouched alongside the fountain, Zinc's first aid kit on the rim. Millard faced the olive trees and the many ripped off leaves around him. Dennison thought that his face had become years older: oil had spattered his chin. His lowered lip sagged, exposing his missing teeth. Landel was bending over him, checking for his ID, his dog tag. Landel's greasy bald head filled Dennison with great bitterness: it said:

Here we are, who cares! In Africa, who cares!

Who will bury us?

The waterboy was moving.

"Hold still," Zinc commanded.

"Now there are only four of us to crew our tank," Dennison yelled.

"So what!" Zinc yelled.

"Four of us," Dennison repeated.

"We can manage, Chuck is good."

Dennison wondered what Millard's wife was like: had she loved the guy or was the beneficiary sum worth far more? His hands trembled: death was such a crappy business. In Ohio death wasn't like this! In Ohio, there were preachers, graves with names and dates on them.

When Zinc had taped his arm they carried the waterboy, carried him into a house across the square, banging on a door, shoving him inside when two women opened. A bullet had smashed his leg. The kid moaned and flopped his arms. He was bleeding badly.

Dennison liked his bright face, his gaunt, nomadic build. He respected his courage: that business with the water bottle, the spotting of the roof gunners. Kneeling and sitting on the tiled floor of someone's living room he and Zinc did their best to bandage the boy's leg. Dennison tried to talk to him but he couldn't come to. People crowded around, yapping, yapping: he saw their mouths going.

Speaking French he yelled at a woman:

"Try to locate a Red Cross man!"

The veiled figure hovered over the boy, her blue boubous was flecked with something white.

"Médecin," she mumbled.

Dennison and Zinc risked a third of their stock of bandages: they rebound the break, padding it.

”Good boy, good boy,” Dennison said to himself. ”Nice kid, nice kid!” Zinc said.

According to Landel, the Anadi mess was a mere delaying action, a hinge in the Nazi retreat. Millard was left, to be trucked to a base. The tanks gulped water. A supply tank furnished gas and oil. Landel, Zinc and Chuck and Dennison worked steadily, with a few minutes for food.

Where’s the thermos? Where’s the coffee? Cigarettes? God, thought Dennison, where now?

A radio screamed: *Advance to Beramet.*

A merchant, with a yellow and blue turban on his head, was opening a double door, a pack of dates lay on his table, a girl was prostrate on a cot, two camels appeared, a pigeon flew.

There was no opportunity to remember the olive trees: Dennison shut his eyes: he belched and swayed in his seat: the hatch banged shut, was bolted shut: he shifted his controls ... Remember?

His arm stung where the bullet had nicked him; he minded the heat; already the roaring of the tank had lost some of its noise: he was growing deafer.

Over the intercom–far away–he heard Landel:

”There’s a concrete pillbox ahead!”

Why the hell should we knock it out! Whose pillbox was it? Why was it there? Where was the damn artillery? Asleep! Must be some other M4’s around! Or an M18! Maybe the rest of the Corps was lost on the desert–in some hellish place. Thoroughly angry, swiping sweat from his face, he decelerated to 5 mph. Let some other bastard wipe out the pillbox!

Landel indicated starboard and they swung close to a brick wall, snailed along it, rounded a corner, and there, near a chapel, was the pillbox, white, dirty, plastered with faded movie posters. Before Dennison could shift gears the crew in the box let go and a shell blew bricks out of the wall and shrapnel crashed against their armor plate.

Landel signalled.

Dennison bent forward in his seat and wet his lips with his tongue, and felt the blood flow from his head: he thought: going to conk out. Must have canteen, soak my handkerchief, sop my face. Better tell him, better tell him ...

”Side street ... go side street.”

Dennison obeyed automatically.

Zinc and Chuck bawled at each other.

”Get shells ready ... ready, Chuck...”

Swinging roundabout, they caught the pillbox from an angle: its cannon was futile, just a rod of steel: methodically, Chuck trained his 75; his first shell overshot but the second crushed the concrete dome; the third shell, aimed low,

burst open a side.

Machinegun triggered, visors wide opened, Landel accounted for the crew, his blood boiling:

He was yelling, whistling, screaming.

Barbed wire fenced the box and Dennison smashed it, treads burying the spirals, the port tread crushing remains of the pill box.

Thinking of the canteen, he got it and sopped his handkerchief: water, face, water, the turret flung open, now he could breathe. Water, a little more water ... there was plenty of water!

As they sped onto a highway the surface seemed annoyingly, deceptively smooth: probably mined.

Watch it, boy!

"Mined?" he asked Landel.

"Safe," Landel reported, doubting their luck.

He had sopped his head and underneath the open turret, his face shone like an Inca ceremonial head: a scratch under one eye was bleeding; his naked shoulders were soaked; he leaned against the side of his seat, mouth gaping ...

He hated the day, hated the bad luck, hated losing Millard. He called himself a fool for permitting his men to crowd about the fountain. Should have known, should have. It was Dennison's fault for not reconnoitering. Give him hell tonight. Tonight ... well, they'd be midway to Ghat. The swaying tank, the roaring treads made him clamp his eyes.

Someone was yapping on the radio.

On the road, beside a bombed truck, lay a crippled GI. The fellow raised his arms–appeared to see the oncoming tank–but Dennison could not avoid him without crashing off the highway. He had no chance to diminish his speed and zoom aside since they were clocking forty. Dennison's nerves buckled, his spine stiffened, his throat contracted painfully, his hands shook: the Sherman raced over the man in a flash and yet Dennison saw him die–could see him underneath the treads–felt him gasp, heard him scream.

"Jesus Christ ... I killed him ... I killed one of our guys ... Jesus Christ..."

Sun was beating through the turret, stabbing the desert. Desert heat swirled with engine heat.

If the highway is mined!

Landel was using his periscope.

The viewer showed an even expanse.

Souped-up, they were hitting sixty.

Was it riskier to cross a mine at top speed? What would the explosion do, heel then over, crumble a tread, stove in the floor, belch out the walls? ... In the white walled house, the Arab, in the yellow-blue turban, was opening the

shutters to his windows … did he sell dates?

In Texas, while piloting his training tank, he had thought of the rags and litter on the ground as the bodies of men. Excellent imagination. Useless. Absurd. Such thinking had not hardened him. It was just another kind of fear. Another kind of folly. His hands were still trembling.

Nothing had prepared him for the first dead in Africa, that first week in Africa, when men got crushed underneath his treads: then it had seemed to him that he had crushed them himself, mashed then with his own weight. He had dreamed then, for many nights, of arms and hands struggling against pressure, faces blotted into nothingness. He had longed to climb out of his machine, kill himself, go, go somewhere.

And now?

Beramet appeared on the road ahead … palm trees, white one-story buildings, olive trees, tamarisk.

Through radio transmission he knew that their tank forces were pincering: the town was to be grabbed by nightfall.

Light shimmered in front, misty pools of it, mirage water, the desert–port and starboard–was undulating with heat and light: heat, combining a scab of dust, wavered over Beramet: a single point, a blue minaret, broke through.

An MP slowed Dennison: standing beside his motorcycle, black glasses over his eyes, tropic hat slapped down low, he seemed a little insane as he swatted at flies. The dust on his cycle matched the dust on his fatigues. Dust was approaching, trailing from a stream of converging trucks, half-tracks, tanks, cars, and ambulances.

Dully, Orville stared at his compass … so this was Beramet? Where, in Beramet, would they stop, climb out, rest?

In a few minutes the compass began quivering: they were in the thick of street fighting, Arabs dodging from house to house, Nazis firing from doorways, windows, firing machine guns, firing rifles. GI's opened a front. A grenade exploded. Sand gushed up. Another grenade forced sand through the visors and ports of the bus. Both Dennison and Landel coughed violently. Dennison leaned forward, his back soaked, his arms soaked, the cushion behind him clumsy, lumped.

Urine sloshed across the floor.

He forced his brain above the shaking tank and roar of fighting. Hell, how lunatic, self-preservation and fear clawing each other. Eyes on the street havoc, he moved his machine as directed. Sometimes he saw Arabs firing, sometimes Nazis, sometimes smoke blotted everything. Something crumbled and fell through dust. Blinding sunlight took over as the Sherman crept forward.

Gradually through radio communications, through signals with Landel, he

became aware that the Beramet probe was almost over ... now he noticed that his hand was scratched and he licked the scratch absently, groggily. It seemed to him that it was some other person's hand.

It seemed to him he was very old (these had been days not hours): in this world there was only pain and everyone hoped to die. In this world there was the torture of sound being tortured. Following a deserted street, he observed death at the next corner, sitting on an oil drum.

He snarled at himself for having joined the Corps, for having thrown in his lot with Landel. A concentration camp would have been better. Time could never obliterate these memories. The brain was permanently wounded. He tried but could not tap the future: he was too exhausted, too hot–as Landel ordered "stop" Dennison doubled over, craving water: he wanted to lie down in water: he wanted to die.

That night, sleeping in the open, death woke him. He woke shaking, remembering, half-remembering ...

On Sunday, eleven tanks and two half-tracks were compelled to halt because of gas shortage: they squirmed into a wadi below a hundred meter red cliff topped by a single dead tree, an acacia that had been dead and stark for fifty years or more.

Crewmen called the place "the dam" although there had been no water there for many seasons. The dam was a low, concrete wall that crossed the wadi. Its concrete apron bedded a few of the Shermans. Landel, hoping the cliff might afford some protection, had suggested they make a halt until supply tanks and trucks could catch up.

Flies were everywhere: they were inside the tanks; they were outside on the treads, guns and turrets–on weeds, rocks, sand. They zoomed into food the crews tried to eat. They crept over hands and faces and necks as men tried to work. They bit. Singly and by the dozens, they came from below, from above, left, right, and flew into eyes, ears, mouth. Men slapped at them, swore at them, shouted at them.

They crawled over K-rations.

Dennison and Zinc, sharing rations, sprawled below the cliff, troubled by the flies. Zinc poured cold coffee from a thermos. With a rag over his face, Dennison was determined to rest as long as possible, doze perhaps. He felt himself drift perhaps ten minutes: how long he never knew.

A bomb hurled him, dragged him through gravel and sand.

Through a torn spot in the rag he saw the tree on top of the cliff fall; he heard rocks and gravel avalanche onto the tanks, rocks and then a dribble of sand.

A second bomber flew over but dropped no bombs.

In a kind of back-flash, he recognized that the second plane was a recon-

naissance plane, following their tell-tales across the desert. Like infallible radar the ruts could lead bombers to ”the dam.” Scrambling to his feet, dropping the rag, he raced for his tank.

A plane swooped low: a black wall of sand met Dennison and spun him around; as he fell he saw the tread of a Sherman expand like a rubber band and slice a man across his waist and chest: the man did not scream. God, Dennison groaned. Another bomb flattened Dennison: Jesus, how many did they have upstairs! The scream of steel on steel mingled with the roar of falling rocks. A bomb with a bent fin howled as it dropped.

He burrowed into sand to avoid hurling metal: he imagined Zinc, Chuck, Landel, dead.

Pain twisted his back.

Silence ...

Getting up, he stumbled across the gully. He found crewmen there, crouched behind boulders and camel grass. Somebody had spread a tarp overhead to cut down on the spray of sand. Nobody said a word. Presently, Chuck Hitchcock came crawling, blubbering, mouth gaping: crawling on hands and knees he banged into a rock. A blast of sand had sandpapered his eyes: lids and eyeballs were ingrained, a sand and blood inlay.

As Dennison dragged Chuck under the tarp he realized he would never see again: he tried to shield his wounded face, the man sobbing, breathing in gasps, his blond, pallid face distorted.

He won’t play billiards again, Dennison thought, remembering Chuck’s stories about billiard games at the University of Wisconsin.

A bomb crashed and a tank exploded: it seemed to leap into the air–the whole Sherman–fell into ensheathing fire. It was visible to everyone under the tarp. Sand fountained. Ignited gas and oil spouted: machine gun bullets began to ricochet. Metal whizzed past.

Another bomb exploded.

”Let’s run for it!” Dennison shouted.

”Get out of here! ... get out of here!” someone roared.

Dennison and a fellow, Jim Harrington, grabbed Chuck, and rushed him down the wadi, swaying, pitching, dragging. They began to gasp. Chuck was sobbing. Dennison thought every step was getting them nowhere; yet Landel appeared out of a wall of smoke, his head plastered with dirt. He slid an arm under Chuck and the three carried him into a thorn thicket out of the wadi and laid him on the sand.

”I’m blind!” Chuck cried. ”I’m blind! Help me!”

Another bomb geysered sand: it left a fog of sand, everyone coughing and spitting. Men tied rags or handkerchiefs or shirts over their face. So, it was sand,

not flies. The heat sweated the sand into the flesh. So, it was heat, heat coming down from the cliff.

”Can’t see our bus” Dennison shouted, trying to estimate damage. He snuffed and continued coughing.

Suddenly, he grinned, and began to shake: the flies are gone, the bomb’s got rid of the flies! He laughed loudly, throwing back his head.

”No flies ... no flies ... the bombers killed our flies!”

”Shut up,” Landel said, hitting him.

”No flies!”

Landel hit him again.

Dennison crumpled to the sand: he knew what Landel meant: he realized too, in spite of his hysteria, that he was lucky to have escaped: cradling his head on his arms he attempted to blot out Chuck’s raving.

With the last bomber gone, the crewmen came to life, swatting off sand and dust, huddling, at first in little groups. In twos and threes they began checking, climbing on their machines, crawling inside. Out of nowhere supply trucks arrived.

”Gas,” the men said.

”Gas.”

Zinc pointed to some butterflies, flying close to the sand, headed past the Shermans.

Dennison rubbed his face: they can really fly: yellow butterflies ... beyond them, in the face of the sun, the heat puffed and writhed; a slight wind kicked up dust. A section of the wadi cliff had toppled and sand had buried snouts and sides of several machines and both half-tracks: the sand had acted as a cushion protecting treads and armor plate. Men began to dig ... gas tanks got filled ... motors started ... tanks pulled away ...

Dennison led Chuck by the arm, Chuck moaning and trembling. They both fell into a sand hollow. Directly in front of Dennison lay a pair of arms, intact from finger to shoulders, the dog tag visible on the wrist, above the greasy fingers.

Lawrence, Dennison saw:

Lawrence Robinson, from California.

Dennison jumped away, shrank back, dragging Chuck, almost hurling him down, bumping into Landel.

”What’s wrong with you?” Landel scoffed. ”Watch where you’re going! A pair of kooky arms scare ya!”

Without hesitating, Dennison whirled on Landel, and knocked him down: he tried to jump on him but Chuck clung to him, moaning, saying ”no ... no...”

”Jeez, man!” Landel gulped. ”Are you nuts again?”

”That was Lawrence Robinson,” Dennison yelled. ”Larry Robinson ... it

could have been me!”

”Fuck you,” said Landel, picking himself up, remembering a corner of the Argonne, where men’s bodies had been blown about like chips. Glaring at Chuck’s bloody eyes he felt no pity for him: he felt they should save themselves for their machines and the job of fighting: let scabs go to hell!

But remembering his job as captain he ordered Dennison to take Chuck to Corporal Willits ...

”He’s over there ... he’s Red Cross ... take him, then let’s get our bus rolling. He’s not been hit. Not bad!”

”Not bad,” Dennison said to himself, angrily.

He saw himself returning to Base Camp with Chuck; he would see him hospitalized; on leave, he would rest by the ocean; ships would be unloading; the surf would be warm; he’d have good chow.

Assisting Chuck, Dennison sat down by him as Willets examined the lidless eyes: in the sun the imbedded sand glistened like glass; blood glistened like glass. Chuck was trembling, his hands quivering on his lap, fingers wholly uncoordinated.

Willets was talking kindly to Chuck.

”Can you hear?” Dennison asked, bending close.

”No.”

”Willits is looking after you ... he’s from the Medical Corps...”

”Who?”

”Willits.”

”He a doctor?”

”Medical Corps.”

”Where am I?”

”By a half-track ... there are wounded here ... Willits and Cobb are helping the men ... we’ll be moving out of this gully...”

”Don’t go, Dennison.”

”Can you move your head ... to the side? ... I want to put medication in your eyes,” said Willits.

”Okay.”

”The stuff won’t hurt.”

”Okay.”

”Hold still.”

”Light me a cigarette, Dennison.”

”Sure...”

Dennison began fumbling through his clothes, expecting his cigarettes to be shredded; the pack was badly squashed but he straightened a cigarette, lit it, and put it in Chuck’s mouth.

Chuck drew a puff or two and then pain doubled him up as smoke trailed across his eyes; the cigarette dropped to the sand; rolling his head from side to side, he groaned, and flailed his arms.

”My eyes ... my eyes!”

”Keep your hands off them!” Willits ordered.

”Are they so bad?”

”Yeah ... they’re bad–keep your hands down...”

The wind shook a dwarf thorn tree behind him.

”Lift your head up ... higher ... I’m using more medication ... soothing...”

”Can ya gimmie a drink?”

”I will,” said Dennison.

Willits was a dark skinned man, very Italian, with greying moustache and grey animal-kind eyes. When Dennison returned with water, he nodded at him, jerked his head toward Chuck, then shrugged his shoulders: hopeless.

”Now you keep your hands off your eyes ... I’m gonna put cool antiseptic salve on a bandage, real loose ... gonna put that around your head ... over your eyes ... we’ll get you to a doctor soon as we can ... I’ll use the transmitter ... others ... other guys ... you know ... get help ... they need help...” Groggily, he went on repeating, talking to himself.

Chuck was still shaking as Dennison walked away–back to his machine.

He and Zinc removed shovels from the rear of the tank: it was slow digging but they released a tread, cleaned the hatches, freed the guns: Landel had a shovel: there was no Al, no Millard, no Chuck: climbing inside Dennison switched on lights, checked dials, checked the intercom and radio: something about the white interior helped.

Switching on the transmitter he shouted:

”Dennison calling ... Lieutenant Dennison calling ... calling X2B ... calling X2B ... Dennison reporting for Fred Landel ... M4-221 reporting ... bombers caught us at point L-T ... place we call ”The Dam” ... tanks badly damaged ... several wounded ... one man dead ... can you send medics? Dennison calling ... can you hear me?...”

A little of the horror abated: there was promise in the lights around him, in the transmitter, the old seat cushion, the thermos on the floor, the gleam of dials: with the earphones over his ears he waited.

The radio spluttered:

”X2B ... we read you ... roger ... we’ve got you on the maps ... news has been coming in ... we know your conditions ... medical help enroute ... tanks moving forward ... medical help coming ... tanks coming ... pass on the word ... over...”

Climbing out of the tank, into the dying day, Dennison notified officers

and crewmen. Enjoying a smoke he perched on the rear of his bus: crews were shoveling sand away from the tanks, bedding treads with tarp and gravel. A star specked the horizon. For an instant, for several minutes, he contemplated the ancientness and greatness of this continent: perhaps some of that greatness could resurrect mankind. How absurd the steel hulks, primitive without claiming any antiquity, primordial because of weight and shape. Yet their hellish threats were not absurd. They had crawled into sand as if it was their birthplace, as if returning home after millennia.

After dusk, after the takeover of the sky, tanks, trucks and halftracks arrived: there were two makeshift ambulances, a corps of medics: ”the dam” became an encampment, a black-in of men and steel. Dennison, at the door of the ambulance, did his best to break through to Chuck who was lying beside an unconscious GI.

It seemed to Chuck, as he fought his pain and depression, he was losing his best friend: everything was out of proportion as he talked to Dennison.

” ... sure ... sure ... and you know there's my sister in London. You've got to meet her ... somehow you've got to meet her. She's, she's pretty ... was the prettiest girl in Racine ... She's stationed at Red Cross ... Dalton Station ... Red Cross ... Dalton ... remember ... if you are ever in London on leave ... remember ... Jeannette...”

The roof lights in the ambulance blinked off.

The chauffeur said: we're shovin' off.

”Here ... take her pic ... her photo from my billfold ... here ... tell her I sent you ... take it ... you can find her ... send me word when I'm at Hopkins ... tell me ... find her...”

”Good-bye.”

”Good-bye.”

London, Dennison thought, as he shovelled away more sand: I'll never see London again. Perspiration made his hands slip on the shovel handle. He and Zinc were digging by lantern light, their shadows mugging each other: arms, heads, legs, shovels, machine. They were able to hear the hissing sound of sand. Nearby someone revved a motor.

In the light of a tank, Jeannette's photo showed a beautiful woman. Slipping it into his billfold he called her his pinup.

”Hell ... I'm hungry,” he said to Zinc.

”There's chow,” said Zinc. ”I saw the truck ... yeah, there's chow,” he repeated, rubbing his beard. ”We gotta get some sleep ... gotta sit ... rest.” He was trying to rub away intestinal pain with his right hand: he had strained muscles as he helped load wounded into the ambulances. Somebody had given him a sticky candy bar, he could still taste it; maybe it would stay down.

”Chuck’s had it … he’s lost his sight … he’s…”

He went on mumbling to himself.

He and Dennison had located Robinson by flash. Dennison had brought his arms and placed them across his mutilated body, on a stretcher in a converted supply tank. Robinson’s ID fell beside the tank and Zinc brushed off sand and stuck it inside Robinson’s torn shirt and buttoned the shirt over the crushed leather.

”Well, he doesn’t have to be buried here,” Dennison said, folding some canvas over him. ”Who’s better off … Chuck … or Robinson? Chuck or…”

Zinc was too weary to reply; his eyes were swollen from the heat, sand, and lack of sleep: numb, he stumbled toward the chow wagon, shoes sinking into the sand: everything he saw was indistinct: everything difficult.

Behind trucks, sitting on the sand, on gasoline drums, oil drums, boxes, the crewmen ate, no light, no smoking.

Shivering as night came on, the two bedded together on the floor of a truck, under blankets and tarpaulin. Wind scraped at the tarp with a sandpapering sound: it tapped on the truck cab and clicked on its glass.

”We attack early in the morning,” Dennison said.

”I know,” Zink said.

”Hope we have luck.”

”Yeah.”

Overhead, Libyan sleep was dropping lower and lower: Dennison squinted at the stars, wondering how many more miles they had to travel before the war ended. Three stars burned in a ragged triangle: gradually, the upper star assumed a greenish pallor. While digging out Robinson’s body a star had glittered above the cliff …

Dennison felt the expanse of the desert around him, felt its thousands of square miles. Pulling the tarp over his head he imagined himself in a grotto, Atala’s grotto: ah, that pitiful story: beauty obliterated by superstition, by folly: lovely Atala had been his companion in Ermenonville, as boy, she and her Chactas … Chactas the blind man … the lover … the wanderer … Doré’s wonderful engravings–those days in E …

And now …

The desert rustled the tarpaulin. The truck swayed.

Still cold, Dennison hunched closer to Isaac, needing all of the warmth he could steal: his arms and shoulders ached: sand grubbing had done that: sand, he felt it in his shoes, in his shin, between his fingers …

Poor Chuck …

Soon, dawn threw out its flag of light; soon men were yelling, talking, pushing, urinating, shitting, coughing, eating …

Motors throbbed.

The radio in a truck blared boogie-woogie, from Casablanca.

Dennison read his wristwatch.

Their tank motor refused to start.

Landel transferred them to another Sherman–number 58. 58 started easily, warmed easily, and they rolled out of the gully, rolled across a flat of sand and sandstone that could have served as an airport, the full moon its beacon.

Everything about the new tank pleased Dennison: it was a pleasure to get away from the old bus.

Little by little, he coaxed 58 into top speed, glancing at his watch, leaning back against the seat, the cushion solid. A shaft of light came in. The periscope was excellent. The viewer clean. He leaned forward and wet his lips with his tongue, something like a smile on his face.

Landel was occupied with his map, his phone wobbling against his Adam's apple, black, cancerous: his bald skull teetered stiffly, pencil between his fingers.

Directly in front of 58, a tank rolled along, another M4, grey, lobbing up dust.

Dennison contrasted its size with the immensity of the desert.

The M4 climbed out of a bomb crater, flicked its fantail, ducked, disappeared.

Dennison realized that the men inside were as lonely as he: men riding inside nothingness, gaping at dunes and flats of sand.

Wasn't that a knock in the motor?

What was that strange vibration in the port tread?

Wasn't that a clicking sound in the transmission shaft?

And the motor temperature?

Heat began to close in.

Driving ports were wide open, the turret was open, the fan was rotating; yet it was growing hot rapidly. Dennison mumbled to himself about the vents. The roaring of the treads knocked the roof of his brain; he felt that the old deafness was returning.

When gasoline and oil fumes increased he let up on acceleration but not before Zinc came down with a harsh coughing spell.

Fear came ...

It crawled along his spine, yesterday's fear, last week's, the past mucking up death, Robinson's arms in the sand, Al screaming, a village gouting smoke and fire. He saw, as in another world, another man's world, his years in Ithaca, at Cornell. The bronze figure of Ezra Cornell was hazed by leaves–then blurred by falling snow. He saw tree-fogged paths winding to his flat on the hilltop above Cayuga. He saw the lake gleaming, blue as a smudged blueprint. He saw himself

rowing with the university crew, his body synchronized to the dim bodies of his mates: Locksley … Neilson … Murphy … Lee …

Lee was coxswain:

Steady boys, steady now …

But all this was dead: his mother was dead: Aunt Therèse was dead, Uncle Victor, Landel and Zinc were dead: all were travelling through a fog, a distant fog.

Without being aware of it, Dennison began to rub his neck at the base of his skull. His head was pounding. He wanted to drink. He wanted to close his fingers around a tangerine, strip the peeling, smell the strong smell. His mother used to buy tangerines at Christmas, tangerines from California, tangerines and purple grapes, oranges, avocados–pile them on a platter on the dining table.

He wanted a piston to jam, he wanted the radiator hose to split.

He longed to sleep during the afternoon or all night.

Sleep, he thought, sleep …

* * *

2

The Ermenonville rain was a cold autumn rain, falling out of a dull sky, slanting in a light wind.

Orville stood beside the grave of his father, weather streaks across the red granite tombstone, across Robert St. Denis, and the dates: 1893-1921. Orville warped his hat to shed the rain and tried to button his makeshift coat closer, broken umbrella hooked over one arm, umbrella and coat from a Paris flea market. He had left Paris early in the morning, on a heaterless bus, a trip of delays and Nazi harassment.

When he started to walk to his dad's grave the sky had been bleak but not threatening. Maybe the sky was trying to flip its calendar, turn it back to another rainy day in June, when Robert had been wounded at Bermicourt, his little Renault tank exploding from a direct hit, on that muddy battlefield of World War I.

Orville was peeved that the rain had caught him; he had wanted to sit on the grass and think of other times in Ermenonville. He noticed other graves in this family plot, those of Aunt Irene, Uncle Mark, his cousin, Marcel … graves under leafless Lombardies. The rain made him resentful of the place and of death. The ground was spongy; the sod could absorb little more; he kicked at weeds with a quick kick. Through the poplars he observed the Petit Lac, its placid water grey: the small poplar covered island, at one side of the lake, with its carved Rousseau tomb, seemed adrift in the falling rain.

Well, here we are, father and son, in the rain. I wish we could have shared our lives. You might have been a pretty fair provincial lawyer. The rain has had you a long time. If I'm killed in my tank I'd be carted here … I guess we like it in Ermenonville.

So long, Bob.

He had never called his dad Bob. He had no memory of him except from photos: one of them came to mind, young face, maybe like his own. Moustache. Blond moustache. A tall man, lean, a horseman, dead for twenty-seven years. Tall man who had taken years to die the invalid's death.

So long …

A swan, on the little lake, close to the poplar planted shore, moved without any apparent effort, its reflection now bright, now dark, now in the rain, now in the clear.

There were swans here when Jean Jacques Rousseau lived here … swans … château swans … and when Rousseau said we should return to nature, had the swans influenced him?

Walking toward his aunt's house, Orville felt undercurrents as a boy in E, when the wind vane on Lautrec's house had thrilled him, when the spire on the stone church had prodded more than clouds. In those days there had been frogs to spear in the Nonette, kites to fly, boats to sail on the Petit Lac.

He passed the bronze statue of Rousseau in the village, a rain beaten thing. Cobbled streets fanned out from the figure. The statue was unchanged. The cobbles were the same. Smoke from peasant houses climbed as it had years ago.

The rain was coming down as it had years ago: a beautiful scene.

He tried to raise his umbrella but had no luck; it banged against his leg as he began to walk faster, hustling into the wind, his aunt's home a few blocks away.

Old Claude Bichain, the family servant, opened a side door; he had been watching for Orville, his bearded face close to a window. Orville, glancing at the rambling breaktimber house, saw his face and, cane-like, lifted his umbrella.

"My, you're soaked! Mon dieu, Orville, come in…"

"I shouldn't have tried … but it's not far to the cemetery," Orville said, and

handed Claude his umbrella and hat, shedding his coat in the doorway.

”I came in the back way ... the front lawn’s flooded.”

”Yes, it’s a heavy rain. The gutters are poor ... we haven’t been able to find anyone to repair them. Come with me,” Claude suggested. ”I have a fire in the kitchen.”

Orville followed him through the butler’s pantry, perturbed by the house, somehow stiff, apart, unfriendly. The weather, no doubt.

”Change here ... it’s the warmest place. I’ll bring your clothes, the things that you left here ... we’ve kept them for you.”

”Claude, how has life been?

”Ah, well enough, I guess ... well enough.”

”You haven’t gotten married again?”

”At my age!”

Orville enjoyed his laughter, the restrained laughter of old age.

”And you?”

”Me ... I’m glad to be here. Seven years since I was here ... seven or eight.”

Bichain nodded, remembering.

”And the war?” he asked, unsure of himself, trying to interpret Orville’s sad face.

”It goes on and on ... I sometimes...” but he stopped.

”I’m glad you made it ... your bus was late, but buses are always late now ... let me get your clothes ... I put some pots of water on the stove ... you see the boiler isn’t working for the bathtub.” He found it hard to speak: he was troubled by Orville’s greasy mechanic’s clothes, his bearded face, his staring eyes, grim mouth.

Orville found it comfortable washing himself by the cast iron stove– polished as always. Copper pots and copper spoons decorated a wall. The fire was crackling in the stove; there was plenty of hot water, Claude had stacked several towels on a chair. Cakes of soap.

The rain guttered down the windows.

Orville stood on a braided rug, probably braided by Annette long ago. He appreciated Claude, so thoughtful, respectful: his beard was longer and whiter. Annette was in the village but what had delayed the Rondes? Where was Jeannette? On duty at the hospital, no doubt. He wondered whether the hospital was overrun with wounded.

It was a long way in space and time, from Africa to London, to Ermenonville’s kitchen: that bombed railway station, that taxi ride through bombed streets, past the British Museum spewing books and walls, blocking the street, one siren triggering another until the city howled like dying children. It had taken some doing to locate Jeannette Hitchcock, at the Dalton Street Red

Cross station.

Opening the stove door, Orville poked the fire and shoved in a couple of sticks: the light played on his naked body. Dumping dirty water down the sink he poured himself a hot pailful. Soap and hot water relaxed him as he washed his legs and thighs.

Claude had his arms full of clothes; stopping in the doorway he envied Orville his hard, white body.

”Can't find anyone to repair the heater,” he said.

”This is fine ... I guess this is where I scrubbed when I was a kid.”

”Use all the hot water.”

”Will Aunt Therèse be home soon?”

”I think so.”

”I'd forgotten it could rain so hard around here.”

”Where did you get off the bus? Did they let you off at the wrong place?”

”No ... I got off in the village...”

”You shouldn't have gone to the cemetery. Not today.”

”No matter ... I wanted to look around ... to think...”

Claude spread Orville's clothes on the kitchen table, arranging them carefully–the valet's touch. He hoped everything would fit. Orville hadn't put on weight. Was I ever built so well?

He limped away and Orville saw his hand on the closing door, remembering it as a boy, the red ”v” on the back: it wasn't so much the redness, it was the ragged shape of the thing. Bichain had the face of a Pole; his Cracow ancestor's grey eyes that faded into nothingness, his beard went to his chest, the hair was always brushed and immaculate.

As he toweled, Orville glanced at the scars across his stomach, where he had been burned by an engine explosion during training at camp. It was pleasant picking up his clothes from the table, holding them up, remembering. He thought everything would fit. Socks first. That old crew neck shirt from mom.

He was eager to telephone Jeannette.

The trousers were okay ... Claude had remembered his belt.

By god, maybe it was going to be good after all, this leave, this Ermenonville, his Jean.

Somebody ought to shut off the rain.

It was growing dark: the eye of the fire poked across the door. Across the braided rug.

The phone was at one end of the long living room, unless someone had rewired it. Without switching on lights or lamps, he walked across the room, hoping it had not been altered: the phone ... he lifted the receiver and waited:

”What number, please?” a pleasant voice asked: the voice was Ermenonville

French and yet Orville thought of a girl in Ithaca, a face with yellow hair around it, a happy face.

"Can you get me the hospital?"

There was a pause as if the operator was trying to identify Orville or was puzzled by his accent.

"One moment, please."

Then the hospital responded–someone, a man, spat through an earful of static:

"What do you want?"

It was the voice of war, with a German accent.

"This is Claude Bichain," Orville lied. "I want to speak to Mlle. Jeannette Hitchcock," he said. "She may be on duty."

"If she's on duty, I can't call her."

"It's an emergency ... damn you!" he snapped out. "Important ... get it? Important!" He hated the guy.

"You'll have to wait ... I'll call you back, M. Bichain. Are you at the residence?"

Orville waited on the tapestry upholstered telephone chair; listening to the rain his mood began to adjust: drops were racing down the French doors: Claude was switching on lamps, tending a fire in one of the fireplaces. Firelight blurred the walls. It was an elegant room. 1788, he recalled. The Rondes had purchased the property from some member of their family. He couldn't remember who the builder was.

Both fireplaces were constructed of yellow glazed brick, their white mantels rested on rococo Caen stone pillars. The furniture, of several periods, blended well, touches of ormolu, marquetry, rosewood, mahogany.

The phone jangled.

"Hello ... hello ... is this M. Bichain? This is Jeannette Hitchcock."

"Hi, Jean?"

Orville had to bring himself round suddenly, snap into the present.

"Hi, darling!"

"Orv, Orv ... oh, it's you. How's everything?"

"Fine. And you?"

"Fine ... Orv, you're here, you're safe!"

"When am I going to see you?" he asked, excited now, wanting to see her at once. "Can I see you tonight?"

"Not tonight, darling." Her voice trembled. "Can't be tonight. I'm on emergency shift. Surgery. Maybe for three hours ... a bad case. I don't want to see you when I'm tired. We've waited ... I can't spoil it."

"When?" he asked.

”Tomorrow morning. I’ll meet you anywhere you say. How about that, Orv?”

”Can a hospital car bring you here?”

”But I don’t want to be with your family. Not now. When did you get here?”

”On a late bus ... I have gotten into some clothes ... get a lot of rest, turn in early, if you can. I’ll come in the morning.” He wanted to say it’s marvelous, hearing your voice, being in Ermenonville; she was already saying good night, and he heard himself saying good night with woodenness; then the phone went dead in his hand–the crude, dumb thing.

Hardly had he placed the receiver on its hook when the phone rang. Picking it up indifferently, he said:

”Hello.”

”Orville, it’s you! How nice. Oh, Orville, I’m so glad you are home. When did you get home? I’ve been trying to get you, but this wretched phone...”

”Hi, Aunt Therèse! I got here an hour or so ago. You sound far off or the connection’s bad. Where are you?” He dropped into her kind of French, the kind she had taught him, Ermenonville’s patois.

”I’m out in the country about ten or twelve miles, at a horrible, dirty farm. Our car has broken down ... I’m afraid I won’t get back till late. Maybe not till tomorrow. Lena and I are here–we’re so disappointed not to be home ... to welcome you. Tell Annette to fix a supper. Claude will look after you...”

Therèse’s effusiveness annoyed him but he sent his love to Lena and assured them that everything was all right.

” ... Lena’s fine ... we got awfully wet because we had the top folded down, and we couldn’t get it raised again. Such a muddy road. And then our engine had to act up. Have you seen Jeannette? Have you phoned her?” She was sputtering. Orville remembered her volubility; she went on chatting about nothing, Orville nodding, smiling.

”Their car broke down ... they won’t be back until late or tomorrow,” he explained to Claude, who was offering a pack of cigarettes. ”They’re at Placiers.”

Bichain nodded.

”Anything you want?”

”No ... I’ll let Annette know.”

Orville walked about the elegant room. Yes, it had been seven years since his last visit: he and his mother had stayed several weeks during that summer. During those seven years he had ample time to finish high school, enroll at Cornell, make the crew, go to war!

In front of the alabaster bust of Chopin he shoved his hands into his pockets. Chopin’s face seemed more poetical than he remembered it. The man’s eyes

stared absently into his eyes. The lips had their absinthe smile.

No, the furniture had not been changed; of course the settees, sofa and chairs had been reupholstered with the identical pattern of pomegranate flowers: that was Therèse's way. The woodwork had been dusted and polished two thousand times and Claude had waxed the parquet–over and over. Parchment lamp shades seemed to be new. He bent over a cloisonné vase: its birds and flowers were in the same Kyoto greenery. He glanced up: ah, it was there, the gold and silver and green fresco of oak and laurel leaves, twined in their ceiling wreath.

Dark red curtains ...

Tired, he dumped himself on a settee, his thoughts reverting to his trip, a sick and quarrelsome woman, the SS troopers playing poker, a boy begging for food ... a half hour slipped away.

He absorbed the quiet. Had the rain stopped? He hoped so. The fires in the twin fireplaces spread their warmth. Maybe the war was ending ... maybe it would end while he was home; certainly it was the right place. Yet assurances were missing.

Shall I go upstairs, to my room?

He closed his eyes as he sensed the firelight.

Claude woke him to say that supper was ready.

Colonel Ronde's meticulous oil portrait dominated the wall alongside the dining table: the gold fame was heavy and ornate: the Colonel was wearing his 1918 captain's uniform, a trench helmet and a pistol, and a pair of grey gloves lay on a table beside him: he appeared to be a reticent, egocentric, stupid man. Orville remembered how dictatorial he had been: you kids get out of the greenhouse ... you kids are not to ride your bicycles through the garden ... you kids must come to dinner punctually ...

Orville was relieved that the old boy was not around: the portrait's frame was tarnishing: pigment was flaking: the Ermenonville forest background was fading: good.

Orville fiddled with the table silver, idly aware of the monogram, the crystal candleholders, the cut glass sugar creamer: three days ago, less than seventy-two hours ago, it had been hell itself at the front: fooling with his knife, eyeing its ornate handle, he wondered where it had been crafted; he sampled the entrée, glad that Annette was putting herself out to please him.

When will I be eating alone like this, in such middleclass pomp!

Annette served roast duck, stuffed artichoke, creamed parsnips, and buttered carrots. Finger rolls were a specialty of hers. He recognized the dry local wine ... he imagined, as he tasted it, the wines, brandies, liquors inside that inlaid buffet ... Therèse would soon be insisting. He would come across some favorites.

The kitchen door widened a crack.

"Everything all right?" Annette asked, hands pouching her apron, smiling attentively.

"Just great!" Orville said. "It's a treat, having you and Claude look after me ... like old times. Where's the Colonel these days?"

"He's in Marseilles."

"Good ... then he's not caught in the thick of it."

"But he's, ah, on duty ... he's ... well, you know how it is."

The door shut but not before he realized that Annette could lose twenty pounds across her stomach and another five through her breasts. Obviously, she knew how to provision her Ermenonville larder.

The dining room was a cluttered place: it reflected neglect or unconcern: unmatched chairs rectangled an ormolu table of cherry, the antique silver service on the Louis buffet represented several periods: the flowered wallpaper and a bevy of melancholy still lifes in oil were unharmonious. Orville could not remember the room as it had been years ago but felt it was quite different.

He heard Jean's voice. "What a surprise!"

"Hi, darling...."

Jumping up, he buried his face in her neck; he kissed her passionately; she seemed to taste of everything good, smell of many perfumes. He helped her remove her rain wet coat, slowly folding its red lining ... his eyes never leaving her.

In the living room she made a little speech, ridiculous words; she hugged him and kissed him on the sofa, the fire glow on her face and hair. He fussed with her hair, smiling.

"Orv ... where's everybody?"

"I thought I told you ... everybody's in the country ... their car broke down.'"

"So that's why you were eating alone! Then they won't be back tonight?"

"Not tonight ... I guess they'll phone again."

"Swell ... gee, it's our place."

He kissed her, with a long, seductive kiss, easing her against the cushions, her breasts swelling: not since London ... tonight ... tonight ...

"My god, the months!" he blurted.

"I'd almost given up."

"So had I!"

"Your letters ... you don't say much."

"Or you ... Wasn't that the telephone?"

She was playing with the ring he had bought her in London: her fingers slid the crudely faceted amethyst round and round: her mind followed it; then she sought his mouth.

Raising his head, Orville saw Claude Bichain, standing by the piano, one hand on top.

”Your aunt just phoned again … she’s staying at M. Placier’s … she was worried … she thought…”

”Thank you, Claude.”

”I’m glad,” Jean said.

”Let me get something to drink.”

Orville wanted to explore the buffet: together, they knelt on the floor, both doors open: they nodded: there were vintages and brands across the years: Orville selected a Charpentier brandy.

”How about this?”

”Good,” said Jean.

A gust shook the French doors and windows, it was raining hard once more. When they returned to the living room, Claude was adding wood to the fires: he wanted to keep both fireplaces burning, celebrant: for love, he thought, as he laid oak slabs over a pair of iron griffins.

”To us,” she toasted, lifting her glass.

”To us … to your loveliness.”

”To your luck!”

On a settee, close to one of the fires, she burrowed against him, tasting his brandy lips, her fingers searching between his legs.

”God, I love you…”

”Tonight.”

”Yes…”

”Sip it slowly…”

”I am…”

”Like it?”

”Yes … yes…”

”Should we drink everything in the buffet?”

”Of course…”

”Why not?”

”Sure, why not …?”

”Are there more wonderful girls in Wisconsin?…”

”No,” she kidded.

”I believe that.”

”Let me undress you tonight.”

”Maybe I won’t be able to wait that long.”

”Or I.”

Shoulders and head against the settee, she told him how grateful she was to be in Ermenonville … I escaped from old London … I love the Petit Lac … I love

the gardens … the forest … the shrines … I've seen Jean Jacques' ghost … oh, yes, at the Lac … ah, you and Colonel Ronde, to work things out for me here … the hospital staff tries, tries very hard to favor me sometimes … so many wounded … but I think … no, no, don't stop kissing me … what difference does all that make? I'll stop talking … now …

With refills, they contemplated the fires, drowsing, yet wholly alive, eager, stalling like animals, happy animals, sure of themselves–anticipating through the medium of the firelight, each other's faces, each other's hands.

He thought of the freckles on her shoulders … thought of her lovely breasts … her perfumed skin.

"Shall we go upstairs?"

"Yes … but…"

"I know…"

"Yes, it seems…"

"But it's my own room … my old room…"

"Yes."

"When do you have to return to the hospital?"

"About eleven, I guess."

"Stay all night with me."

"I want to, darling."

"Then…"

"It's not so easy…"

"Cases?"

"Kiss me … let's not think … go on kissing … unbutton my dress … kiss my breasts…"

Snuggled together, they listened to wind and rain attack windows and doors and roof. Claude checked the fires, and said good night. They were, for all their passion, fighting mental fatigue, fatigue that had been accumulating for months.

"Let's lie on the floor near the fire," he suggested.

"No … we'll go to your room…"

"Put your head on my lap…"

"Bend over…"

"Now…"

"Yes…"

"Okay…"

"Hmm … more…"

Silence!

His hand cupped a breast; she ran fingers through his hair; shall we ever marry? In some architectural office will he bend over blueprints, and then pick

up his phone and say ...?

We'll never have a house like this one–not seven bedrooms. Ours ... three bedrooms, $24,000. That would be okay.

She thought of her life: her dad had been a dirt farmer plus rural teacher, he had never had much time for home; his health had failed under demanding jobs: skinny, hard featured, hard headed ... Orville must never get like that. I must get him out of the war, somehow, somehow!

As they kissed, the room came back, his smiles, his hands, his love.

"Another brandy?"

"No."

"We'll do better tonight than we did in London."

"That was awful that awful room..."

"Shall we go upstairs?"

"Yes."

She was standing by a mantel, her hair against the intricate carvings on the Caen stone: she was taller than he thought.

"When it's eleven o'clock?" he queried. "Will you?

"Don't think about it."

"There's no taxi at that hour."

"Then we'll walk ... there's no curfew is there?"

"No."

Upstairs, up the dimly lit stairs, he opened the door to his room: a fire was burning in his fireplace.

"Claude made a fire," Orville said, chuckling.

"How nice."

She hugged her coat against her breasts as she glanced around shyly. Peering into his mirror on his chest of drawers she saw the gun rack, rifles, shotgun, fishing rods, botanical prints ... a mounted bass over his bed.

"What a funny thing to make love under," she kidded.

"I've made a real catch this time."

"Oh, darling..."

She touched the feather-light quilt, admiring its floral pattern: wasn't one almost like that in a room at home?

"It smells nice in here," she commented.

"It's the pine wood."

Firelight followed their nakedness as they lay facing each other on the quilt; they were afraid to move: they wanted a moment of serenity before love making, to see one another: then she smothered her mouth with his and his tongue probed inside: she sensed the hardening of his belly muscles: he rolled her over completely, both of them laughing. She stroked him–cooing, pushing him away

to prolong their joy.

Yes, this is the place to have a woman: eyes slit, he glimpsed his rods and guns. Kneeling in front of her, he dragged her against him. They tottered to one side. They slipped from the quilt onto the floor, giggling.

Her breasts rounded to his fingers: they felt cool, wonderful: she was marshmallow white.

He stood up and she stood and then she jumped against him, swung her legs around him, clamped her arms about his neck. His hands cupped her feet. She kissed him, holding their kiss. To feel his strength–his arms, his belly, his chest.

”No ... no ... not now ... on the bed.”

Though he held Jean surely, they swayed and slid to the floor again; once more on their bed he crawled over her, saying:

”I’m coming in, Jean ... coming...”

”Okay.”

Mouth to mouth they made love, her stomach pushing, his flattening, the bed squeaking: his penis felt hot to her, her vulva felt warm to him; her perspiring body was in accord with his; he clasped his fingers over her narrow buttocks; their mutual orgasm began, stopped, then flashed again and again: Jesus, Jesus, dearest, darling ... yes ... yes ... oui ... your mouth now ...

She lay back.

”It’s ours, my dear,” she laughed, ”the prix de Rome!”

”I accept,” he laughed. ”We’ve earned it ... double award.”

They never got to the hospital until early morning, she and Orville striding together, the sun brilliant; after good-byes, after lingering kisses, he walked away, walked about the village before returning home for breakfast. After breakfast, he commenced a letter to his mother, to inform her of his leave. As he wrote on an old leather writing pad, sitting by his bedroom window, Aunt Therèse knocked, and called his name.

She had aged: her features were reddish and swollen, pudgy contours that were somehow childish. The mouth smiled and yet there were wrinkles in the way of her smile. Seven years had done this. They kissed dutifully.

”I’m sorry,” she wheezed. ”We just got here, just now ... Claude said you were upstairs. I’m sorry ... I’m so upset.”

”No, no! There’s nothing to be upset about. Sit down.”

”I think Lena’s caught cold ... another cold ... she has too many of them ... you see we got soaking wet, couldn’t raise the top of the car ... that awful downpour ... oh, we had to borrow clothes last night ... we had to go to bed early!” Orville grinned, in spite of himself.

Hands fluttering in her lap, she continued: she was sixty-seven or eight,

padded at waist and breasts, rings underneath her eyes, her glasses rimless and dual-lensed, her hair a series of grey-white streaks. Orville knew she often spoke without pauses, blurring her words, but now her voice had become harsher and the blurring often made it difficult to understand her.

Someone tapped on the door.

”Come in,” Orville called: he was pleasantly surprised by Lena's beauty, her athletic body: her face had assumed an esthetic quality; she wore her black hair combed close to her skull–quite Spanish.

”Hi, Orv!”

”Hi, Lena ... you look great!”

”It's good ... it's good to see you!”

They kissed like kids.

She had always liked or loved him: she admired his masculinity: their old rapport returned at once: arms around each other they grinned happily, sheepishly.

”How was your supper last night?” Therèse asked.

”Great,” Orville said.

”It was probably dreadful. Annette can be so careless. And here you are, writing a letter, when you should be horseback riding or playing tennis. Mon dieu–this is your leave! What are we thinking about!”

Orville and Lena laughed at her.

”Come on, we'll go for a walk, then we'll have lunch,” Lena said. ”Orv ... you and I ... Mama, talk to Annette: let's have something special.”

The sun had ducked under and both fireplaces were burning in the living room. Claude, at the front door, was admitting several people, women and men laughing–a bass voice saying:

”Take my hat, Claude ... old man, my hat.”

”It's Thomassont and some friends,” Lena explained, going to greet them.

Orville was introduced to Arthur Thomassont, Celeste de Ville, Pierre Valeriaud, and Jean Piccard. Piccard pumped his arm, swaying an alcoholic sway: ”I remember you at school ... do you remember me?” Orville saw from his aunt's face that Lena's friends were tight. In a moment Pierre buttonholed Orville, cork colored eyes blurred, his goatee bobbing. Playing with an unlighted cigarette, he said:

”So you are fighting for us ... how noble. Our legionnaire. Well, our Renault plant has blueprints for bigger, more sophisticated tanks ... when the war is over. We have an unbeatable staff ... de Gaulle will get the Nazis out...”

He blinked at his cigarette and blinked at Orville, stepping back, a little embarrassed by his own verbiage.

Pierre crumpled onto the piano bench, talking to Mme. Ronde, vehement

about the theater, the Parisian theater, its control by the Nazis: such biased censorship.

Baldheaded Thomassont poked through magazines; Lena, dressed in a sedate brown skirt and yellow blouse, chatted softly with Celeste, a pretty woman wearing lavender trimmed with squirrel: her serious face was painted dramatically over the eyes; the cheeks were ivory white, her mouth sensual. Presently, she approached Orville.

”Is it like home, coming back?” she asked; she held out a cigarette.

”A little that way,” he said, flipping his lighter for her.

”We came by to ask Lena to a party we're giving at my place in Senlis. I'd like to have you come; we can drive over and pick you up. It's my birthday.”

”When is your birthday?”

”Next Friday.”

”My leave will be over by then ... I'll be in Germany.”

”Oh ... I'm sorry.” She took his hand to say good-bye. ”It's risky, bypassing the Nazis ... I despise them ... my brother has been imprisoned ... my mother's Jewish ... I hate all this ... Paris is dreadful ... I wish you luck.”

”The war will be over in a day or two,” cut in Thomassont, waving a magazine.

”Good-bye, Orville ... Mother knows you ... you see I was in Switzerland when you were here ... we're pretty drunk; next time when we come...” She smiled a sincere, warm smile.

She was speaking English.

”Goodbye,” Orville said. ”I wish you luck ... you and your family,” he responded in English.

”Then you'll be with us on my birthday, Lena?”

”Of course I will.”

Lena tapped Orville's arm.

”Take Piccard to the bathroom,” she said. ”He has to vomit.”

After helping him to the bathroom, Orville waited outside: so this is why we're fighting a global war: is this why the Russians are staging an all out defensive last-ditch stand?

At the front door, Valeriaud praised the great tank corps: ah, yes, the French, the British, the Americans! He opened his fly, scratched, yanked his zipper half way. Orville went into the living room.

”I attended school with his mother,” Therèse said to Orville, joining him on a settee. ”She's dead ... a good woman ... he's the only son ... quite spoiled, spoiled but a superb pianist.”

The guest car plunged away–with a rasp of gears.

”Valeriaud manages to obtain gas when we can't buy a gallon ... he works

for a construction company, he's a friend of the Nazis. He's building a house outside of Ermenonville, mansion, I should say. He has a famous collection of Rousseau letters and manuscripts. He has the whole of *Emile* written on foxed sheets. He wants me to sell the collection. I may buy it to keep it from going to Germany."

At lunch, the three ate without chatting freely, disturbed by the visitors; it seemed their family reunion was already becoming commonplace. Therèse fussed at Annette. She mumbled about food shortages, prices. Lena mentioned movies and plays–entertainment current in Paris, things she wanted to see. Therèse questioned Orville about ready-made clothing in the U.S. Was it reasonable? There were nervous remarks about Piccard and Valeriaud.

As soon as possible, Orville excused himself and went off to finish his letter, shave, dress, and meet Jeannette. In spite of yesterday's rain it was balmy and he opened his bathroom door that led onto a balcony and with his face soaped, lingered there, thinking of Jean and their love making.

The shaving brush was not his but his uncle's: *Lucci-Milano* was stamped in gold on the handle: revolving the brush pensively, he recalled details of Milan, the shops there, pigeons swooping from rooftops, the great mural by da Vinci! What was it like after the bombings? He wanted to see the mural with Jean, wanted to rendezvous old places with her.

He shaved gingerly, wasn't there too much hot water? And the towels on their racks, weren't they a little too luxurious? He studied the delicately painted rose buds on the basin: still the same. But the silver soap tray? The porcelainized towel rods. In Ithaca their bathroom was plain–nothing to distinguish it from hundreds.

Yet, outside their home, a stream gushed through a rocky glen, and there were grey squirrels.

Ithaca will be all right ..I'll have my office on State Street ... I'll obtain contracts for homes overlooking Lake Cayuga ... I'll manage trips to New York ...

When he finished shaving he held a towel against his face for several moments.

Ermenonville's narrow streets were almost deserted as he walked leisurely toward the hospital, thinking of the cobbles, the shop signs, weathered doors, the plants in windows and window boxes. E. would always be a core for him, a nucleus rooted in Jean Jacques, microcosm, reflection of a concept: and cobbles, tiled roof, the church, the Nonette, converging, spreading. At a certain intersection he imagined meeting former friends, schoolmates. He had rejected any renewal of relationships: what have they for me or I for them? He hoped nobody would visit him at the Rondes'. He had phoned Jean so there would be no hitch, and she was waiting for him in the hospital garden, her coat over her arm, bareheaded.

The garden, a neglected X of paths, smelled of damp and earth and carbolic acid. A bird whisked into a chestnut. Poplars made a line behind the rambling building that was hunch-backed with age at one end. Honeysuckle-vined where Jean waited.

As Orville entered the garden, a tall man appeared on one of the paths: he shook hands with Jeannette, a wrinkled, white haired, cane-limping man.

”Orville,” she called. ”I want you to meet Dr. Cartier.”

Cartier turned, turning on his cane, to stare at Orville.

”My friend, Orville Dennison.”

”Ah.”

”I'm on leave, doctor ... it's good meeting you.”

”On leave here?”

”My father was Robert Saint Denis...”

”Of course, of course ... now I place you. We're old friends, you and I ... I've changed; so have you–welcome back!” He bowed a little, professionally.

”Are you in charge ... the director?”

”Yes ... some say that I am ... is that right, Jeannette?”

Laughing, she said, ”Of course.”

Dr. Cartier used his cane to pin down a leaf.

”We have too many cases ... compulsory cases ... just flooded.”

”Jean has mentioned the problem...”

”More than that,” exclaimed the doctor, beginning to walk away, ”more than that ... I could use ten nurses like Jean ... we lack equipment. So, so you came back to France to help! My best to Mme. Ronde, and remind her of our dinner engagement tomorrow night. She works with my wife ... more problems. It's a time of problems, as you know.”

”Be careful.” He stopped walking to emphasize his warning. ”There are many who want to talk, who make trouble.” He smiled a smile at himself, a sad smile, and turned away.

Orville kissed Jean, encircling her in his arms. Remember her perfume, something said. Remember!

”Darling,” she said.

”Do you like Dr. Cartier?”

”Yes ... I assume he is very capable?”

”Yes ... he's our Albert Schweitzer.”

At one side of the garden they found a rusty wrought iron bench beside a hedge, half-dried daisies around them, the flowers shredded by the rains, a puddle holding a single maple leaf, skiff-like, near their feet.

”How was your day?”

”Many wounded youngsters. We have to put them in the hallways ... all

kinds of cases ... Have the Rondes returned?"

"They came this morning; we had lunch together ... I've been writing a letter ... as I came here Aunt Therèse stopped me on the stair, saying Lena is ... is with the Maquis."

"She confided that to me ... others know."

"It seems that Therèse's worried."

"I guess she is."

Nurses passed through the garden, a few of them saying "hello."

Someone's footprint was filling with rain water and Jean stared at it vacantly, then buried her mouth in his hair, fingers on his face, wondering, vaguely, stupidly, what was going to happen to everyone: the nurses seemed an extension of that everyone.

"I knew you'd like Ermenonville," he said.

"Do you still like it, Orv?"

"I guess I always will."

"Without war..."

"You know, it was hard for Mom and me to move to the States–but a job is a job ... and Cornell pays well enough..."

"I'm grateful to your uncle ... he manipulated strings to get me here..."

"Your French has improved."

"I hope so."

"It's your accent..."

She laughed.

"Let's go for a walk," he suggested.

"Let's ... I brought my coat, just in case."

"Oh, it'll probably rain."

They passed the hospital, passed a grove of pines, the path strewn with muddy needles: he stopped by a new sundial surrounded by dried flowers: hand in hand they read the Falsum Stare non Potest and laughed because they couldn't translate. The château's four stubby spires and slate roof were wet, forlorn, seemed misplaced history: the châteaux and the war were millennia apart; so were the swans unreal as they fed close to the shore of the Petit Lac.

Face uplifted to his, she said:

"I come here sometimes ... to rest ... to think of you."

"Lonely, that's it."

"There's something here..."

"Before the war ... but now."

"Just getting away..."

"I used to fish with Marcel ... we had a boat, made it ourselves, kept it hidden. We'd sneak off and paddle the Nonette. Such fun!" He ticked off the

years since Marcel's death. His past became too remote, too clumsy. It had to be bypassed–through Jeannette.

"Have you ever gone out to the island where Rousseau was buried?"

"No ... how could I?"

"A rowboat, a punt ... you know my dad's buried near here in Ermenonville."

"I didn't know that."

"He was injured in a three-man tank ... in 1918. The tank was blown up but he had to wait years to die. And so I got born."

"Orville!"

"That's how it was, Jean. As for the tanks ... father and son ... you'll see."

"Don't say that ... that's plain dumb!"

They were walking along the shore of the Petit Lac, swans paddling close to the shore, the greenery of the shoreline greener than the water.

"You and I ... what a joke ... we've got the war around us, the entire world at war!" He was unaware of his change of mood–his fumbling.

"It takes two to face the world," she said. "There's a way for us ... I believe that!"

They walked a short distance, still following the shore of the lake: kids were romping on the cut grass: girls had a goat on a rope and they were urging him along, his bell tinkling: they seemed to be headed for the nearby château, visible through the groves: a bunch of boys were throwing stones and sticks into the Lac to annoy the swans.

The tall poplars on the island bent in the wind and their movement seemed to impel the island, transform it into a ship: it was headed into the western sun, leaning somewhat to the starboard.

As Jean and Orville wandered through the park, she told herself she must have faith: last night's love-making said so. Orville struggled with mistrust, concentrating as much as possible on the things around him. Fumbling back to the days in London, Jean heard Orville say, in the threatened Red Cross building:

"So ... you're Chuck's sister ... let me show you your photo ... it's in my billfold ... Here, he gave me your address ... want to see the snapshot?"

"Sure, let me see it."

"Okay."

"But look ... what's happened to your leg? Don't you know that it's bleeding?"

"I hadn't noticed. That flak sure gets around."

"Sit down ... right here!"

"Sure."

As she medicated and bandaged his leg they talked about Chuck's blind-

ness, when and how it happened; she had to attend other wounded, but Orville was able to give her details.

For an hour or more the blitz thundered over the city, damaging buildings on Dalton Street, reverberating, flinging dust and sewer stench. Orville hated the place, this Red Cross hive of death.

"I've got to check in," he said, after the hell had died down; yet next day he was back, bringing her a potted azalea.

Here comes America ... here's somebody who knew Chuck ... somebody who cares ... tell me ...

"I've been thinking how we met," she said, as they walked.

"Yeah ... bad place."

She agreed.

"Better forget it," he said.

They walked to a diminutive temple under pines, beach and ash trees eighty or ninety years old. The temple was a semi-circular building of limestone, a soft brown limestone shell, its roof and pillars in a bad way; a couple of the pillars were lying on the ground, pigeons sitting on curving pediments, weeds among the floor stones.

"It's Rousseau's Temple de la Philosophie ... yeah, but it's falling down ... I used to play here. See that stone slab, lying at the entrance, you can read the inscription."

They bent over the stone but were unable to read the words for weeds and rubble.

"Was the temple made for Rousseau?"

"No ... it was made later ... he lived in the pavilion of the château."

"I've been here lots of times..."

"Have you visited the château? Is it open these days?"

"Lena took me ... it's closed ... but we got to see the place, the wonderful tapestries in the salon ... remember we don't have many châteaux in Wisconsin."

"Canoes," he said. "Canoes instead of châteaux."

"Are you good with the paddle?"

"Yes ... yes, I am ... and you?"

She nodded.

Separation, mustering out pay, back-pay, travel allowances: they could go to Wisconsin, New York, California. But when would mankind return to nature? Rousseau had said ... let nature repair mind and body ... who remembers? We're lucky to survive these days!

Lucky ... lucky to have Jean ... to be in E ... lucky to be on leave ... to walk in the park ...

As he kissed Jean good-bye at the hospital gate, he tried to summon an

optimistic word. Something, during the last half hour or so, had come between them, as if they both admitted they were pawns, as if the miles across the Atlantic already separated them.

Her hair's exquisite copper gleamed in the light: fog was behind her hair: fog was flowing across the countryside, puffing, swirling, smoking in from the Nonette river, fog that smelled of newly mown clover.

"I'll see you tomorrow … about two. If there's gasoline I'll come in the car … if I can borrow the car." He smiled.

"Good night, darling." Then a long pause.

"Sleep well."

"See you."

To reach home, Orville followed a short-cut that bypassed the Petit Lac and its island; the path was weed choked: burdock, thistle, artichoke, and mustard. All were rain wet, fog wet. From a rock wall fence he took in the spires of the Ronde place, fog crawling over them, the fog in the pines and chestnut and elm toward the château, now fogged out. Crossing a bridge over the Nonette he found the fog thicker, smokier, on the bridge itself it seemed stuffed into the cracks of the 13th century masonry.

In the cemetery he paused by his dad's grave, weedy and foggy. Lighting a cigarette he felt the fog nip at his lighter flame.

You're buried there … if I'm killed in the war what then? If all of us die … not a bad idea. Not a bad idea!

He shrugged his shoulders and the shrug brought back painful memories of tank fatigue.

He blew smoke into the fog.

Lights in the windows of the Ronde place–vague in shape and size–recalled his Ithaca home: his dad's insurance policy had made it a reality.

Orville picked up a stone, considered it, dropped it.

I can arrange my papers … Jeannette will be the beneficiary … she can purchase a house in Wisconsin, for Mr. William J. Bruce, geometry teacher, football star … three bedrooms … split level … nice … or nice Ithacan place, by the wine dark sea!

What was that in the fog? Was it fear?

Fear gleaming out there?

Jean has faith, faith in man, faith in us. Lena has faith in the Maquis. Therèse has faith in the past.

Maybe we ask too much of life.

Freedom?

What sort of freedom?

Rousseau's?

He flipped his cigarette into the fog and heard it spit derisively.

He walked until late and Lena was sitting in the living room, when he returned.

”Join me, Orv. Have something with me. Mom went to bed a long time ago … I’ve been sitting here, reading. Cognac? Cordial? Whiskey?” She regarded him intently, his fog wet hat and jacket. ”I guess it’s still very foggy,” she said, stroking her cat, wanting Orville to sit down next to her.

”It’s getting foggier,” he said, standing in front of her, removing his hat and jacket.

”I don’t like foggy weather,” she said. ”The airmen … their missions–you know.”

He dropped hat and jacket on a chair.

Lena and her angora, cousin Lena in yellow sweater, Persian slacks, a bird-pin at her throat, barefooted, ponytailed: she smiled the smile of long ago. But there was no turning back.

”I wish we hadn’t changed,” she said.

”Yes, of course … but we’ve changed,” he admitted.

”What can we do?”

”Nothing … but if we could…”

”I was sixteen when you were here last. I was just a kid. Seven years ago … a hell of a lot of years, with a war tossed in.”

”I wondered about coming back … about us.”

”Who escapes change? Half the time Mama’s disoriented … Papa isn’t the same…”

”I hear that you’re one of the Maquis.”

”Maybe better than a convent,” she jibed. ”More exciting … do you disapprove? An honest answer.”

”I disapprove of a lot of things but it doesn’t matter in the least,” he said, sitting beside her, making the cat relinquish a little space.

”Your girl is a fighter,” Lena said.

”Fighting for men’s lives.”

”We Maquis fight for men’s lives!” she exclaimed, her eyes glassy, and narrow-slitted: she was recalling her last parachute drop. ”Better than capitulation! Better than fraternization!”

”I know, I know … a great job! A tough job. I’ve heard some things! Without you … it would be that much longer … cost more lives … I know!”

She puttered with whiskey that Claude had brought in. Standing in front of Orville she noticed that his wet clothes made his sex conspicuous. She felt his equal, as friend, as lover. As friend and equal she could confide her Maquis experiences: as part of the Ronde family, its military background, she admired

his "uniform": they had much in common: she had been his Amélie.

"Take off your wet shoes ... don't you want to change? How about something? ... Your favorites are ready." Stooping, she touched his shoulder, her fingers moving along his collar, moving to his face. "Let's try to go on as we were ... We read our Atala and René by the lake. So, we lived two hundred years ago, climbed the hills, sailed our lake ... ours was all sweetness, as Chateaubriand would say."

Yet as she said this she wanted Orville naked, wanted herself naked, both of them lying by the fire. Lifting the cat onto her lap, she folded her feet under her skirt, and said:

"How's Jean?"

She was annoyed and amused by her own contradictions: perhaps it was two hundred wars ago they had been Chateaubriand's characters. Atala, a foolish fabrication. For that matter, so was the Rousseau legend: there had been little in that man's philosophy for her these last few years.

"How's Jeannette?" she repeated, envious of their love affair.

"She's okay ... do you see her now and then?"

"Now and then."

"Like her?"

"Not really."

"Are you away from Ermenonville a lot?"

"Yes ... and I don't know much about Jeannette ... she has her job."

Sipping his whiskey, he let his eyes wander: the Chopin bust, the tapestry, the books, the fireplaces, the girl. Bending forward, he wet his lips with his tongue.

Raising her glass, Lena began to sketch in the Maquis she worked with: she found them eccentric, unscrupulous, some of them capable, some over-dedicated: as she talked she appreciated Orville: he was Orv: most everything about him pleased her, his unbuttoned shirt, his wet clothes, the way he smoked, the way he talked, his family accent.

Impulsively, in a gentle voice, she began sharing her own life, her life in Paris:

" ... When I'm in Paris I stay most of the time at the Maison Croix ... no suspicions there ... part of the old place has been converted into a hospital ... ambulances ... men coming and going ... doctors ... Maquis ... I was in Marseilles for about a month, stayed with Dad. In Paris I usually stay with a fellow ... we share ... Charles Chabrun ... we sleep together..." She laughed at herself: it was a little like telling him that she had grown up.

The rose-grey Bravort rug stretched out from under her and her angora, its weave intricate and worn, a thing of flowers and wandering blue. Behind her,

framed in narrow gold, matted in grey, was a 17th century Chinese waterfall, pointed rocks, clouds. Beyond it the tapestry from boyhood days–Galahad and the Grail.

Orville felt some of these things and they seemed a part of her face, part of her eyes (as he listened), her guilty eyes, the eyes of war. When she brought a tray of food and knelt in front of him he bent over and kissed her passionately.

Aware of his luck, he avoided, with the grin of a hypnotist, the words he could never say, both rapport and frustration.

”Lena?”

”Yes...”

”Can I have your car tomorrow ... Jean and I?”

”Of course you can. Claude will have it fixed I'm sure. It must be difficult to get away from the hospital these days ... so many wounded.”

Did he know about the gas chambers at Auschwitz? Did he know about Dachau? We Maquis know ... we ... could he guess how often I cried after he left E ... does he know? ...

”Tomorrow,” he managed to say, but now he was afraid, afraid of himself, ambivalence taking over, he continued eating goodies from the tray but the break had come.

She noticed his twisted mouth, his uncertain fingers.

”I'll find us some dance music ... I'll turn on the radio ... dance with me, Orv.” Then, she blurted: ”Orv, are you really in love with her?”

”I helped get her out of London ... Uncle Victor helped me get her out ... we couldn't leave her to those blitzes. Do you love ... do you really love anyone, Lena? Do any of us really love, any more? Hasn't life become rotted?”

”What are you saying?” she asked, evasively.

”Nothing ... nothing...”

He put down his glass and got up and went to the piano; he had not touched a piano for over a year and he had no notion of touching this one; he wanted to be near it, thinking, for the moment, as he stood by it, of his mother, missing her. In Ithaca their piano had become impotent, had given way to the radio. Unsatisfactory–like altering one's name.

He rubbed his face with both hands.

(Landel had said ... Zinc had said.)

Without seeing Lena, he walked about the room, hesitated by the Chopin bust, lingered in front of the fireplaces; then, rubbing his hands together roughly, shrugging his shoulders, he said, ”Good night.”

From the stairway, he called:

”See you tomorrow.”

That wasn't his voice, Lena told herself. She listened to his steps, going up:

two, four, five, eight: life was that way now: automation: death. The click of his bedroom door was the click of Amélie's door: with cold hands she fondled her cat, speculating about tomorrow, the uncertain tomorrows, if there were to be many of them? Softening the radio music, she remained on her knees, fingering dials, longing for Orville.

Orville switched on his bed lamp, and the rack of guns, the fishing tackle, the mounted bass over his bed appeared with a kind of jabbing abruptness. Jean had laughed at his trophy–his Nonette prize. He wished he had her in his room, had her sexiness.

Copies of *Le Matin* and *Combat* lay on the bed table and he rustled through them, sitting on the side of the bed, seeing Lena's body catwise. What changes. What irony. Something like double laughter ran through his brain.

He began undressing.

He called himself a fool.

A Rousseau thought came to mind:

"The innocent plans of the good hardly ever find fulfillment." Was that how it went?

Innocence in E?

In Ithaca, life had been innocent enough. Back there, there were thoughts of office plans, gas station blueprints, residential plans. At Cornell, he had a few things pretty well figured out. Not pat, yet ... well ... that new system for track was a good system, based on a series of camera studies of runners: position of the hands while running, the length of the stride: careful correlation had to be established: the same sort of studies for the crew, each oarsman photo fixed, the angles of his oar ...

He dropped his socks on the carpet.

When I was a freshman I used to wear a copper medallion with Rousseau's face stamped on it.

A news sheet fell on the floor and he kicked it aside; at the bottom of the page, in large type, he noticed war news of his arena.

No ... it's my leave ... goddamn the war!

Let them blow themselves up!

All the tanks can go to hell!

Zinc and Landel!

I've got a girl ... a redhead ... calm face ... freckles on her shoulders!

He felt her hand between his legs.

In bed, the lamp out, he saw the fog creeping along the Nonette, he saw a man walking along the river, he saw ... a door banged on the floor below and everything became more illusive, with the radio playing faintly.

Perhaps in the morning ...

Perhaps in the afternoon ...

In the afternoon he called for Jeanette, the gas tank of the old Renault half full; it was a warm, sunny afternoon, more summer than autumn; Bichain had tuned, washed, and polished the car. Agreeing with his suggestions, Orville was to drive a certain route (no Nazi interference). The car buzzed along and then, at the hospital, it refused to budge another inch.

Mme. Ronde, who spent many hours caring for the wounded, appeared on the hospital steps; she said:

"You two walk a while ... be together ... that old car! But you know it's going to rain soon ... when it rains come to the house ... we'll have tea."

And it worked out like that.

She was a true provincial: she had to show Orville that she was more than his aunt, that she was an all-out American:

"Jeannette, you from Visconseen ... I know where 'tis on our maps," she said, in her rough English. With her effusiveness she asked about Wisconsin, the winter sports: was it true the state had so many lakes: was it true that it got fearfully cold there in winter: was the snow deep?

As they drank tea in the living room, Orville sank into himself, the women talking E talk, a silver bowl of dahlias between them: a sense of vacuum haunted him: naked superficiality seemed to surround until scalding tea soaked into his body: the dignity of the old room came to his rescue.

When the phone jangled, he jerked about in his chair.

"When our phone rings it bothers me too," Jeannette said.

Mme. Ronde answered the ring, saying it was Pierre Valeriaud.

"Pierre wanted to apologize for being intoxicated when he was here–he's a pretty nice man." As she lifted her cup, her facial expression became set, almost pained, as if this was something medicinal she was drinking.

In her ladderback chair she seemed to overfill it: for a while she had nothing to say: drinking her tea, biting sandwiches, she might have been a peasant overwhelmed by work or tragedy. When Claude entered and announced three priests, Mme. Ronde was displeased:

"They're men who help with refugees!" she exclaimed, and stalked off. "Have them sit in the dining room ... I have to go upstairs for a list."

While she was gone, Orville found Claude and asked him about the bikes: were they stored in the barn, in the house? Have they been used a lot?

"We've been using them ... there's not always gasoline ... I'll get the key. They're in the linen room. The tires are new. Lena has used one bike for a while. I guess a little oil might help–if we can find any oil."

Key in hand, Claude led Jean and Orville to a small windowless room, behind the kitchen; as Bichain unlocked the door, Orville felt her face against his;

his mouth sought hers. The door unlocked with a pop, letting out the smell of soap and fabric.

”We kept our bikes in our barn,” Jean said, following Orville inside.

”Big barn?”

”Three cow barn.”

Bare light bulbs illuminated shelves of household things.

”There they are,” said Claude.

”How are the tires?” Jean asked. ”Enough air? Hmm, this one’s hard enough.”

”How about the rear wheel?” Orville asked. He checked the tire and checked the hand brakes as Claude tried another bike, other tires.

”Let’s go,” Orville said.

”Where?”

”The park ... along the Nonette.”

”Okay.”

As he wheeled a bike outside, Orville put together other rides, alone, or with Lena, or with Marcel or some school pal ... no details, just the realization that there had been so many pleasant rides, sun and countryside, picking apples, birds in hedges, chickens and dogs.

”I’ve got a good bike,” Jean said.

”I don’t want a girl’s bike,” Orville said.

”Okay.”

Laughing, she mounted and was first away from the house, wishing they could ride a dozen times, ride to nearby places, Senlis maybe: France was bike country: and war controls were lax around Ermenonville.

”I’ll lead the way,” she sang out.

”Let’s ride along the Nonette, to the forest...”

He had a British bike, hers was Swiss; both were scarred, squeaky at the fenders, slack-chained; with worn hand grips. They rode side by side down a slight slope, willows along one side, the four turrets of the château visible. The Petit Lac winked a blue wink. Tiled roofs sloped about a stand of chestnuts; a weather vane rose above trees; someone, at a dilapidated farm, had a pen jammed with swine and the swine squealed as the bikers rode past.

The Nonette’s rows of willows appeared copper grey–cloud shadowed. The river had a few white swans at a curve and beyond the curve some men were rowing in a white rowboat. The water slid under a stone bridge and they biked across the bridge and followed a cobbled road.

”It’s rough,” Jean said. ”Ride slowly.”

”It’s the best we can do.”

On the bike road the wagon-car-truck ruts had tall grass between them;

the surface was smooth; his handlebars looked down on her squatty ones as they peddled. He thought her dress amusingly sedate, hardly a dress for cycling, but then she hadn't planned to ride.

"When did you ride a bike last?"

"I dunno ... years ago, I guess."

As they rode she felt more and more at ease: it was fun knocking at weeds and grass with the pedals: all of a sudden France became USA, became Wisconsin, not foreignness, not isolation. The rooster on a fence, the dog barking at someone's gate, crows flying: weren't they home?

"This way, darling. Our path ends at a farm."

"Coming."

The sun was out now.

Someone's windmill squawked rustily as their route narrowed and ended at a barbed wire fence: the windmill vanished behind trees, behind time.

Orville got off his bike alongside a stile and laid the bike on the road; Jeannette leaned her handlebars against the wire of the fence. Beyond them, a field of grass stretched to another fence line, a smooth, green field, anchored in space by a red mowing machine deserted for the season.

"I used to mow hay in this field," he said.

"By hand?"

"Sure thing."

She climbed onto the stile and sat beside him, the weathered planks shaky, beetles crawling about under the bottom step ... Chuck had collected beetles as a kid ... Chuck would like it here, sitting in the sun.

"Now ... now where?" she made herself ask.

"Across the field," he said.

"Your aunt said it may rain."

"We can't let a little thing like rain stop us."

"I'm game."

"Give me your hand."

"What about our bikes?"

"Nobody will bother them."

"Wait ... not so fast. My skirt's tight."

"Jump."

A field of grass: after the tank corps any field was inviting. In Ithaca, fields had extended toward the lake, downslope, fields between residences and groves: *High above Cayuga's waters* ... the Cornell song twanged for an instant.

He led the way.

Jeannette thought him handsome in his floppy trousers, tight striped jacket. How far off the hospital and its wounded! Orville, she said to herself. "Orv, Orv!"

she said, as they walked through grass. Rushing forward she grabbed him, spun him around, and kissed him.

"You'd make a good tackle!"

"On your team."

He gestured:

"Over here there's a shed, if it hasn't been torn down ... see, there it is. That's it."

The shed was three-sided: a cattle feeder and temporary shelter, made of discarded timber and mismatched shingles, something flung together years ago, just high enough to walk under. As Orville and Jean stepped inside swallows flew away.

"It's nice and dry," Orville said. "It would be swell if we could picnic here ... there's a little spring nearby ... I like it here."

"I like it too."

Someone had left a horse blanket rumpled on the bench; straw and hay littered the floor, the place smelled of timothy and clover and cattle.

"You can stand there if you want to," she said. "I'm sitting down ... taking off my clothes." She was laughing at his expression, laughing with anticipation. "I'll get my clothes off before you get yours off. Do you want us to be sedate?"

As she undressed she noticed a pencil of clouds, the scattered hay and straw, the horse blanket: she knew how she was going to spread the blanket, where there was a little sun.

She wanted to say, darling, I love you, but busied herself with her clothes.

He had nothing to say: there was something in this nudity, this love-making, that perplexed him, annoyed him: as he took off his clothes he felt he was some sort of damn puritan: lying beside Jean he was more interested, for a moment, in the swallows as they returned.

Picking up a straw he stuck it between his teeth; he picked up a straw and stuck it into her mouth. Giggling, she took away his straw and substituted her own. Bending over him; she said:

"Bite it."

He bit the straw, staring into her face.

"Now."

She bit the straw and he pulled.

The game was on. They had to stifle their own laughter. Straw and hay got onto their bodies. Straws caught in her hair and fell on her shoulders, freckles and straws ... he was captivated ... his mouth covered hers. She rolled him off. Her fragrance came to him as he lay on her.

"Here's where a mosquito bit you," she said.

They were lying side by side.

”Here’s where a flea bit you,” he said.

The sun blinked out as they played.

He imagined her in Switzerland, at St. Peter’s, old Rome’s St. Peter’s: domes, arches, pillars and bleeding crosses: they were camped on tiny St. Peter’s island: silence, meadows, woods … where Rousseau had been happy … where …

”You’re lost to me … you’ve drifted away … where were you?” she objected.

”I was thinking of a trip with you … Switzerland … look, look there’s a wad of hay in your belly button.” And he crumpled some hay and filled her button.

”Love you … love you … love you!” she exclaimed.

Queer, he thought, queer about Lena, about us. We used to have fun. Did a lot of wacky things. At school together … played … sang together.

”How long will you be with me, Orv?”

The question troubled him.

”Two more days,” he said. ”Almost two days…”

”I didn’t want to ask … but…”

She avoided his eyes–faced the extensive field.

She felt herself fall away from him, fall through the present, parachute into far, nobody left, only the wounded, her drab quarters in the hospital: wash basin, neglected walls, dirty windows, cracked door, outworn throw rug.

He thought of Lena:

”She has a lover in Paris,” he said.

”Who has?”

”Lena…”

”But we have each other … so…”

”We have forty-eight hours … ah no … it doesn’t do to count … We…”

”Can’t you stay longer?”

”You know I can’t–it’s impossible! And Lena … she wants me to sleep with her.” He half heard his own words, resenting them, resenting Lena’s influence.

”Who does?” Jeannette was stalling: trying to erase the fact.

”Lena.”

”Orv … you’re kidding…”

But she knew he was not kidding. But now, now she wanted to put on her clothes, the playful sex mood was over, she wanted to take her skirt and blouse off the nail, hide her sex. The hay and straw became ugly: why was she such a fool, risking pregnancy again? And in this stable! At this time! She was the biggest ass in France! Then, in spite of herself, in spite of her reasoning, she yanked her body over his and hugged him desperately, kissed him desperately, aware of the weeks ahead without him.

Like Chuck … another blindness!

All right, then another blindness.

Chuck, Chuck, where are we?

"Hold me, love me love me," she begged.

He cuddled her, mouth to her shoulder, fingers exploring, enjoying her warmth, fumbling at the same time for something had spattered in his brain: a voice, then, a roar, the pressure of fighting, Landel at his cannon, Zinc and his machine gun, all the impotence of violence.

He watched her get dressed.

She was no longer his.

Buttoning the cuff of her blouse, she asked:

"Where will you be fighting ... your Corps?

"Germany."

Eyelids pinched tight, as she slipped on her skirt, she tried to pray, a prayer from her childhood, a prayer her Lutheran pastor had taught: nonsensical, not labelled for adultery, unlabelled for war.

"Will your hospital job get any easier?" he asked, pulling on his sock, sitting on the bench.

"I hope so..."

Dear Orv, I want to be your wife, I want to give you everything you want. Orv, I want to make things easy for you. I want us to have kids. I want us to be happy. It might really happen to us ... we can't tell. Maybe a farm, a Wisconsin farm, nine acres, white house, red barn, maple trees, pines, birch.

"There's a lot of hay in Wisconsin," she said, in a strained voice, wishing to say something amusing, maybe something sensible.

Orville nodded.

He was slipping on his shirt.

Crows specked the sky ... the swallows were above the field. The sun was much cooler, ready to blink out behind clouds.

I'll take her to Ithaca, to Mom's house–for a few days. Mom will love her. We'll hunt for an apartment. I'd rather get started in Ithaca than anywhere else. There used to be a little apartment on Landfair ... pretty good place ...

He was purchasing his ticket for the train to Paris, he was showing his fake ID, answering questions. The ticket agent was saying ... Kissing Jean, he forced himself to memorize her overcoat, its scarlet lining, the row of crummy buttons; he made himself memorize her rundown shoes, her wrinkled felt hat ...

Lena and Aunt Therèse were standing close to the scaled walls of the depot, smudged plaster, egg yolk plaster: they were standing side by side, Therèse crying.

"Write to me if you can," Jeannette said.

"I will."

"Take care of yourself.'"

”I will ... you, the same ... good-bye...”

”Au revoir.”

His brain was scrambling words in French and English, asking questions: wasn’t there something more he should tell Jeannette? Wasn’t there something he could say to Lena? Wasn’t there a word for Therèse?

Astride a shabby suitcase, hating the Nazi uniforms around him, inside the beat-up train, he gazed at tiny E through filthy windows: the locomotive jerked pathetically, jerked faces, cobbles, swastikas, and tiled roofs.

* * *

3

Dennison examined the lanky civic tower of the town of Bretten, across the Roer River: he noticed the Teutonic coat-of-arms on its tiled side, the ivy climbing its brick walls. He guessed the tower might be 12th century. The clock face was of bronze and brass. The time was 8:10. Lowering his binoculars, he checked the buildings below the tower, then he studied the expanse of hedgerows between the town and the river.

”Can we get through those goddamn hedgerows?” Landel shouted.

”Yes,” Dennison yelled.

As he raised his binoculars, at 8:12, he saw the tower explode: the disintegration directly inside the lens appalled him: dust burst from the ancient bricks and mortar, the big clock leaned, crumpled, its gears protruded, a hand tore off, brass inlay twisted, ivy rippled and fell. Bronze and brass gears shot upward, outward, pitched down onto roof tops, accompanied by a shower of debris.

Dennison lowered his binoculars, feeling that he had seen time destroyed: he said nothing.

A series of explosions ripped across the town as the heavy U.S. bombardment got under way: roofs collapsed, walls collapsed, fires broke out, smoke enveloped streets. With another glance at the base of the clock tower, Dennison leaned against his tank and witnessed the destruction as wave after wave of bombers dropped from a mackerel sky. He was architect enough to gauge the

losses and realize how costly it would be to reconstruct after such bombings.

And the guys in those houses ... had they been born for that kind of death? Where was man's dignity? His sanity? Landel had a broad grin on his face: it said let the whole lousy German country blow up like this!

The Nazis have had it coming to them, had it coming to them for years: fucking around with their militarism! Bastard Hitler! Jew killer! Maniac!

Landel was sorry the war was drawing to a close.

Bretten ... what a sleazy town!

He timed their advance, eager to push on and crash his tank against opposition: kill. He wished he could invade Germany at the command of a tank division!

Zinc was tightening bolts on the hedge blades: large knives the crew had fixed across the front: without them it was impossible to buck the hedges. The blades gleamed in the bombed sun. Zinc's face shone, clean and fresh: after several days of good food and sleep he appeared rested. The length and toughness of the blades were in contrast to his jockey-built body and boyish face. Helmet on the ground, the wind whipped his hair.

Lord, Lord, he said to himself, they're sure as hell wipin' out that pretty town ... listen ... listen. Ah, there goes a rough one. There's another! Jesus! Yet he did not pause to watch.

Bolts tight, he opened the tank turret and dropped inside, started the engine and began dickering with the carburetor, adjusting it to a faster, more dependable idle. Swiftly, expertly, he dumped in two quarts of oil–tossing away the empties.

Good engine, good V-8, good horses, good wiring.

They had twenty-two machines ready for this attack, most of them parked in a ruined dockyard along the Roer: tumbled bricks, fallen beams, smashed glass everywhere: four-by-fours, bent girders, bent pipes, and mauled boats around: a life preserver dangled from a post near Zinc: HEINRICH VARNA was lettered in red.

Orville, Zinc and Landel had tank 9: a fifteen ton Lee, measuring twenty by eight, nine feet high at the turret. 9 was tough, battered, lame on the port side. Rough terrain had knocked off some of her grousers. Zinc knew how to nurse the Chrysler engine but it drank excess water and extra oil. Her armament was first rate: her machine guns had been reconditioned and a new 78 cannon had been installed–for Landel.

Zinc lit a cigarette under the open turret, feet dangling from the driver's seat.

Jesus, god, we ought to be on our way–they don't know how to coordinate nuthin'–them brass. Peeling a stick of gum he chewed it quickly, spitting on the floor, longing for his 18-footer, slipped on the Vermillion River. As neat a boat as

any! She could tack round like a frog.

With Millie they had sailed across Lake Erie, good ole windy Erie … sunny weather, lie back, drink beer, toss the cans over … Millie crawlin' over me, unzipping my zipper … ah, Millie … Millie … good Buckeye kid …

Suppose she's moved away by now: she said she was gonna move … in her last letter … job with the county welfare … what a screwy kid … beer and more beer … but she wasn't fat … now, now do you want to make me pregnant!

She liked it when we went to the synagogue … Isaac, when you get back, sure … you'll see, it was better to wait till after the war.

She'll have my letter pretty soon.

Okay, okay … there's the signal: now, we'll move forward, we'll settle that dumb town, clean it up proper … okay, I got the signal … yeah, I've bolted the turret … okay, Dennison, you okay? Okay, Captain? Okay …

Caterpillar fashion the tanks crawled from the dockyard and headed for a pontoon bridge across the river: radio reported it should be a routine crossing, keep to the center, the artillery will throw in everything for cover.

The road leading to the bridge had craters and shelled potholes. Fog appeared.

Landel complained bitterly.

The bridge wobbled.

9 shook the planking violently: Dennison clung to his controls, feeling that the bus might keel over on the port side; the motor went sluggish; treads dragged; a Sherman in front of 9 bent the flooring; swayed, then shot ahead.

Say, Dennison thought, that guy's good. Send him to Indianapolis!

Waiting for radio communications, he leaned against the seat and wet his lips with his tongue. Crooked springs in the cushion jabbed him and he tried to avoid them by inching to one side. He wanted a drink. He wanted to rush across the bridge, rush through the town, finish. Wasn't this crossing something Napoleonic?

Through his periscope he tried to penetrate the smoke that hovered over Bretten: he remembered the pattern of hedgerows and remembered the route they had to follow to knife their way through: the rows worried him: supposing their engine conked.

There was a dangerous delay on the bridge, the pontoons fluctuating, exhausts smoking, GI's streaming past on the starboard, jogging by the hundreds. What's the delay, fussed Landel. He roared on the intercom.

Carefully, Dennison eased 9 along, working the carburetor gingerly: he edged to the starboard, increasing his speed little by little, fighting for space with the jogging GI's.

"We'll make it … we'll get across," he muttered through the phone. "Here

we go again! Hang on! Nah, have to cut speed ... have to give those guys a chance ... better run it on the center ... better chance ... won't tilt ... won't tilt..."

"Slow ... slower," Landel yelled. "Watch it ... watch it!"

The bridge had submerged as they approached the town, water sloshed across, brown, crawling with oil slicks.

A GI, wearing an orange helmet, gun belted, wigwagged the route into town. Yet water deepened and chunks of wood floated across the pontoons in front of Dennison. He wallowed through a quagmire at the last pontoon; down she dropped to solid ground with a terrific bump; slobbering and smoking she climbed a grade, the hedges to the right.

Would the terrain support her weight?

Were there minefields?

Word had gotten around that the Nazis were to stage a last ditch stand here: SS troops, reserves, god knew what all: the engineers had had ample time to plant mines, there was no doubt about that: earlier Landel had picked up radio warnings: three divisions in the vicinity. Now it was mud, smoke, hedgerows, hedgerows, with red leaves, red hedgerows raked by gunfire.

A week or so ago the Corps had lost eight tanks to skillfully laid mines and tank traps.

Dennison braked and brought 9 around to avoid a pile of rocks a farmer had heaped up for a boundary.

"Hedgerow," Landel belted through the phone.

"Okay!"

Does the fool think I'm blind?

Slicing through the first was rough: branches and leaves swept over the periscope and viewer, climbed onto the cab, then toppled to one side. The ground held. They climbed toward Bretten. Smoke foamed out of a tree. A shell exploded. Climbing higher, 9 ran into machine gun fire. Dennison snaked the bus, falling, rising, smashing bushes. Leaning forward in his seat he tried to say something to Landel.

Landel grabbed the butt of his gun: he had no notion of being caught: if the Nazi gunners raked their underbelly it would not be because he was slow: where were they: camouflaged: over there, higher, behind those bushes ... yes?

A tank appeared, off starboard, a Pershing, traveling fast.

Zinc detected riflemen behind a hedge: through a slot in the smoke he shot low, retracing, raising the muzzle, screaming his anger as he triggered the gun.

"You won't get away ... I've got you..." he yelled.

9's motor was working hard: she was doing her best at 8 mph, the heat increasing, hitting against the white walls, oozing out the ports, clogging the ceiling: African, German heat. Heat of combat swung the machine.

Landel's burst, as Dennison cut through a hedgerow, accounted for men at an anti-tank gun: the men were assembling it, one was rigging the tripod, another hoisting the barrel: gun, knapsacks, rifles, and ammunition spun into the air. Machinegun slugs plowed into a fellow as he attempted to flee. With a half turn, Dennison rolled over the gun crew and crushed men and gun.

A shell burst beside 9.

Another detonation, and they were in the midst of a barrage, explosive forces yanking at the treads, hammering at the armor plate, slugging mud and gravel against the turret, smoke and acid penetrating inside.

The tank rocking, Dennison stopped until the smoke cleared: they stripped to the waist and dumped their shirts on seats and floor. The sky crackled. The sky flamed. Dennison let the engine idle–he felt the pressure of shellfire on his skull, outside and inside his skull.

Landel was firing: the recoil of his gun made him snap open his mouth and hang his jaw. The cab reeked of cordite and powder.

Move … advance, Landel signalled.

Dennison worked the tank over rough ground, butting, rearing. He beat his hands on his knees to limber them. A shell hole gaped directly in front; he swung his bus expertly. His mind was numb: he was unafraid: he felt he would get Landel and Zinc through. When the tank stalled, the treads circling, circling, Dennison swore shrilly.

His hands felt greasy and he rubbed then over his trousers and on the seat cushion.

Landel signalled:

Left

Dennison watched the compass fluctuate, watched the gas gauge, the engine temperature: heat was climbing.

Smoke bombs were dropping.

Some bastard should bob up with a flame thrower, he told himself. Here he comes from behind that hedge. Look at those infantrymen retreating … now we'll cross that plowed field … other M4's … cross together … what did they raise here, wheat? Isn't that a horse over there, across the field?

As they advanced it was curious how the smoke trapped them and then exposed them. Several houses appeared out of the smoke trap; riflemen fronted one of the houses; others rushed into a small barn; a geyser of earth and smoke replaced the barn.

Dennison grinned when the barn disappeared.

He observed a grove of elm trees: are we lost? No grove was indicated on the maps! He tried to signal Landel but a plunge of the machine almost pitched him out of his seat. Shellfire sprayed white, like flung salt, over the line of vision.

Not on any map!

Up front someone was signalling: standing in the path of their tank he waved both arms. An officer? Some Nazi trick, Dennison thought. Then he saw another GI and identified them as Americans. The nearest GI had his helmet squashed over his eyes; stooping, he pointed to the ground. Hands upraised, he signalled stop.

Without hesitating he rushed to their bus and beat on a forward port. Landel let him inside.

"Minefields," the GI screamed.

"What?" Landel yelled. "Can't hear!"

"Minefield!" the sergeant yelled.

"Louder."'

The fellow grabbed at Landel's leg pad and scribbled on it:

TURN AROUND. STOP OTHERS. USE RADIO. MINEFIELD. SIGNAL OTHERS.

"No use turning our bus around," Landel shouted.

"Radio ... the radio," the sergeant shouted.

"Ok," Landel yelled, reading his lips.

Dennison took over the transmitter.

They had stopped near a woodland; other tanks grouped around them; the barrage had lifted.

It was chilly: the autumn air nipped their nakedness: they huddled behind their machines, talking, urinating, smoking: as soon as they could they donned shirts and jackets: the earth, they discovered, was peppered with apples, exploded from nearby trees–part of the woodland.

Zinc picked up a red-yellow apple, bit it, and smiled.

Dennison grinned as he bit one.

"Come on, Captain, have one!" Zinc said.

"Worms."

But he picked up an apple and found it delicious.

A crewman from their Corps, a corporal named Jim Moore, ran up, flopping his hands and jerking his head crazily.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" Dennison shouted.

Moore could not hear him, and yelled:

"Mine!"

"What?"

"Mine ... minefield."

"Yeah ... sure ... we know. That's why we're here, Jim. Have an apple!" Jim shuffled over, flopping his arms, coughing, lurching, eyes glazed.

"He's nuts!" Landel said.

His apple was wormy and he threw it down and tried another. Apples ... apples ... we stand around eating apples ... there's some way out of this ...

Biting and sucking the apple, he circled his tank, trying to get a lay of the land, looking for other GI's who might have information, instructions. Dennison had climbed inside, and was radioing: perhaps information was being broadcast. By now six machines had lined up along the woodland, some of them using foliage for camouflage.

Low flying planes ripped the sky.

Another tank approached Dennison and Zinc.

A GI's face was scrawled with grime and sweat, his helmet had been ripped; he carried shirt and jacket over his arm–the knuckles of one hand were bloody.

"Where's the mine?" he bellowed.

"Dunno," said Zinc.

"How many tanks we lost?"

"Where's the mine?"

"Apple?"

"What?"

"Have an apple."

"Can't hear ya."

"Sit down."

"Cigarette?"

"Had to wait ... dangerous..."

Landel appeared, mud on his clothes. Squatting by Zinc, he hollered:

"Get in the bus!"

"Wait?"

"No, get inside!"

"Hell no, let's wait here," Zinc objected.

"All of us inside ... we move!"

"Where?"

Nobody had a chance to hear that directive: a shell exploded: Zinc dropped his apple, picked it up, and cleaned it warily. Landel and Dennison settled onto their seats; the heat clamped around them: leaving the turret open had not cooled the bus.

Dennison had stuffed apples into his pockets ... what were they expecting, a signal? Landel unfolded his map, he munched an apple carefully, read his wristwatch, and wiped his face with the back of his hand. Grease streaked his jaw. He thought it must be blood till he stared at his fingernails. Sagged in his seat, Dennison saw him bite the apple, saw him dig grease from under his nails, welcoming this respite.

It wasn't so long ago Mother and I strolled about Heidelberg ... we had

spent two or three weeks there, boating, climbing, sampling pastries, sight-seeing.

Munching his apple he began to despise the tank, began to fling his mind: Landel ... look at him, chewing away on his apple! Damn ass!

In Heidelberg they had strolled along the Neckar, boats and bridges, chinks of river between trees and houses.

She had sketched a castle that had a heraldic glove chiselled above the door.

A girl had waited on him in a shop, a slender girl, very blonde, very blue-eyed: a woman to lie with ...

Dreams ...

A GI brought Landel a message.

He read it and passed it to Dennison.

Head West. No minefields.

"I hope they know what they're doin'!" Dennison yelled.

West ... he consulted the compass.

Dennison warmed the motor and chewed an apple and swung 9 west, west across dry ground, climbing gradually. The treads beat down a hedgerow. The cab was getting hotter so they stripped and climbed and wormed 9 and filed through a woodland and crossed a field. The battle swept around them. Battle without immediate barrage. For Dennison driving became a matter of mechanical movement, goading of muscle, endurance of heat, tolerance of gasoline stink, smell of oil and gun powder ...

Dennison was amazed to see a flock of sparrows in a hedgerow.

At the top of a slope he saw Jeannette's face.

What are you doing there?

9 was working toward the port side.

He braked.

Dead Nazis lay in front, their bodies in a clot of equipment: they were sprawled in a maw of bicycles, smashed machine guns, duffle, rifles, coils of telephone wire, helmets.

Dennison remembered that their infantry had fought here yesterday. Last night's rain had soaked the dead men ... their bodies were sinking into the ground, into weeds and grass.

They blurred as he jazzed 9.

A saddle sloped below the tank and he nosed the bus along it seeing a machine gun emplacement on the next crest, its sandbagged front standing out. Dennison signalled Landel and Landel loaded his gun, swaying, grabbing for handholds, helmet slipping.

For a dozen yards the slope was easy going: it seemed to be sod all the way: then the ground leveled to a sort of pasture, oddly green, brilliantly green:

vaguely, Dennison tried to figure out why the green was different: his brain was too tired to register. Green snagged at the treads and then he caught the flash of water; before he could swerve, before he could brake, he felt 9 sink.

No amount of power budged her.

Cleverness at the controls meant nothing: he reversed both treads, tried the port tread, tried the starboard tread, 9 bogged deeper and deeper. They were trapped in a runoff, a swampy catch basin–mud and water under tractionless treads. Sweat poured down Dennison's face and he wiped it from his eyes, scrutinizing Landel, aware now that Landel had been yelling at him as he struggled to extricate 9.

"God," he groaned, "we're stuck, sure as hell."

Stop, Landel signalled.

Grabbing a note, Dennison wrote:

Motor overheated

Landel scribbled:

Don't leave tank. Intercom out.

As he read the scrawl, Dennison thought he would rush outside: Landel's grey face and jittery scrawl maddened him; he thought angrily: we can't crawl out of here–we'll die in this hole. Then he recalled the machine gun emplacement above them.

He wiped his face–waited.

Bullets ripped across 9's cab: they crawled and re-crawled over the armor plating. Battening their ports they checked their ammunition, checked the fan, checked the turret bolts.

In a short time Landel returned their gunfire, using all of his skill: he lobbed four single shots, waited.

Dennison stumbled to the rear to urinate.

He bumped against Zinc who was clinging to his gun, blacked out: their half-naked bodies slapped. Locating their canteen, Dennison passed it to Zinc who drank, canteen tipped up, his eyes shut. Shoving Zinc into the driving seat, he took over his gun.

How good to stand up. Yet he had to fight off sleep. Swaying against the machine gun butt he drowsed, trusting Landel, Captain Fred Landel. If the bastards unlimbered an anti-tank gun or hurled grenades or mounted a flame thrower! If!

Probably the Nazis were trapped in their own emplacement.

Let somebody else wipe them out!

Anyhow, 9's beat. Battery weak.

Maybe another tank could drag her free.

Maybe ... a requiem of shells!

Tonight ... what time was it?

Tonight was a long way off.

He shivered and drowsed. Sleepily, he fingered his automatic, and found its steel warm.

... Bretten's bombardment seemed to be going on and on.

... The clock tower was still exploding.

... His world shifted, perception by perception.

... Christ, it had been a tussle, piloting the tank to the Roer River: debris: men and trucks: fog along the river: mental fog: like London fog: walked and walked in the fog: that was in Tunbridge (or was it Tunbridge?): that was the night he had slept with Raymonde: the hearth in her room had a Solomon's seal on each tile: they had talked and talked: warm: warmth of her body: nice little breasts: nice and warm: warm covers: Raymonde very tired: warm ...

... Strange–that hammering sound: mortar shells?

... Strange, Zinc asleep.

... Strange, to be an Ithacan!

He woke when a shell rocked the tank. He shouted.

He felt inside the stomach of death. When could they crawl out? Another shell whined. His throat tightened. He felt cold and buttoned his shirt and zippered his jacket and licked his lips and listened: was Landel shouting? Was it dark outside? It seemed to him that 9's motor was running. Bending over Zinc, he tested the switches. No, the motor was not running. Zinc was asleep.

Fumbling about, reaching for Dennison, Landel pulled him close and yelled:

"No ... they'll shoot you down."

"You stay ... try the radio ... I get nothing ... stay."

The flesh under Landel's eyes was quivering.

He realized he could not weather out their rescue: frantically, he clawed at the jacket: an hour, another hour.

"I'll make it ... get help. Fire my gun!"

"Hell, they'll cut you down."

"No ... they don't return my gunfire ... when I fire ... nothin!"

"A trick," Dennison warned.

"No," Landel said

"Hell," Dennison yelled.

Landel was gone.

Dennison lined up the emplacement, arching and depressing the gun accurately: there was no return fire when he fired. He fired again. Five minutes. Ten. No return fire.

Perhaps Landel had made it by now.

Dennison eased into the seat, wondering about Zinc.

He was still asleep; his sleeping face was repulsive; his warped body, his jockey body, was repulsive.

Eyes on the emplacement, he studied its arrangement of sandbags, ripped off branches, wilted and shredded leaves: he estimated that four or five men had done the job: why had they selected this location? The emplacement looked old, a week, a month. Some sort of rear guard. They could have depleted their stock of ammunition. They could have retreated.

He slept.

Zinc woke.

He fished in his pocket for an apple and ate it. Somewhere they had K-rations on board. Without lighting the cab (it was dark now), he brought out the rations and the canteen. They ate and slept. Fired guns and ate. Cheese, K, chocolate bars. Without tasting anything they ate everything. The radio was out because the battery was low. Water was oozing over the floor: the bus had sunk that far. They had to sit with their shoes on the dash or on the walls of the tank. As their hearing returned to normal they talked a little. It seemed to them that the radium hands of the chronometer were glued to the dial.

There was no shelling except in the distance.

It was colder.

Raising his jacket collar, Zinc thought of home: home and steam radiators, his dad smoking his pipe, the neighbor kids … yeah, they poked fun at my hair … Red … Red … banter across his dad's grocery counter … why you little Jew pissant, how the hell are you? Heah, runt, reach me a box of saltine crackers … no not that size … the giant one….

At school they pestered him, name, age, color of hair … His dad had said, over and over, get yourself a job, boy, the sooner the better. Life had been stupid until Millie came along, Millie and his boat. Millie wouldn't fail him: her letters (he tapped his pocket), kept him going.

Eyes on his machine gun slot, he mouthed chocolate and it adhered to his teeth and stuck between them and clotted his palate (the bar had threads on it from his pocket); he tongued the piece down with a sticky tongue.

He imagined himself thumbing a magazine, the fold-out of a naked girl: someday, soon, he'd have time to read the Sunday comics; someday he'd find a 32-footer in the classifieds, Buick engine, cabin good condition, sleeps 4, galley, 2-way radio–terms … a price he could afford … someday he'd open a deli and make damn good money.

Somehow the lull in the shelling became threatening: it was ugly, heavy, a part of the armor plate, part of the menace of the emplacement.

Dennison hunched his legs, unzippered his trousers, and picked lice from among his hairs. He searched with the help of his flash. On his belly the engine

scar seemed to have a thicker scab; he tested the scab and scratched it soothingly.

He wanted to masturbate but something prevented him, perhaps the eye of the compass. He swayed, let himself sag, when he shoved back against the cushion the bent spring bothered him.

Apple cores floated on the water.

Change, that was it: war was change, if nothing else, the slap of rain, slug of wind, whistle of death. Fear had its changes too. Fear was possessive. Then change was possessive. Change ... you ate and slept and that was change.

Your scrotum shrank between your legs. Another change. Your genitals crawled inside your body. Your penis crawled in. Sometimes shellfire drove them in, penis and scrotum.

Sanctuary.

Abruptly, clearly, Jeannette spoke to him: ”Orv, don’t stare at the floor like that ... turn out your flash ... you’ve got to get out of that bus ... crawl out ... tell Zinc ... both of you have to leave ... do something about getting out ... get up...”

He dragged himself to the engine and leaned against it.

Can’t stay here ... move!

Eyes to the periscope he submerged: below surface he observed his mother painting a watercolor, a stand of trees along the Nile, brilliant green against brilliant sun on the river: The torpedo raced toward Persepolis, sand, Persian sand, sun, flies, flies on the ruined city, flies in the shah’s palace: another ruin to the starboard: flies on our food: the dune moved: this was Notre Dame, its buttresses bombed, water high along the apse: wasn’t that bell from Claude Debussy’s music?

Water had flooded the Louvre, or was it the bombings that had wrecked the building? Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa lay on the floor. Gold was washing over the frame: if he hurried he might save the painting. Save? How?

Hunkered over, cold, he felt he had been isolated for years: everywhere was the impenetrable: dazed, he sagged against the wall; then, peering out, he realized the sky was a flame above the emplacement. So Bretten was burning. Shelling grew distinct. Burning clouds seemed to be approaching.

Dennison regarded the sand bags for a long time.

”They’re gone,” he said to Zinc, hand on his shoulder.

”There’s nobody up there. See. Look. Nothing. See in the light from the sky, nothing. Landel ran for it. He got away. Come on ... let’s get out of this mess...”

Through wavering light from the town and the clouds he thought he saw somebody stumbling toward 9.

”Zinc, look, somebody’s coming.”

”Where?”

”It’s Landel.”

They waited, waited.

It was nobody and Zinc sank into pain. Dennison lit his flash and fumbled about for their canteen. Shaking its near-emptiness, he drank, then pushed it at Zinc, who drained it.

”Bah, it tastes bad.”

”Let’s go.”

”Where?” Zinc asked.

”Look at the sky … there’s light enough for us to see … Bretten’s done for…”

”What about Landel?” Zinc asked.

”Hell with him!”

”Then, let’s go.”

He found his flash; the canteen was floating on the tank floor, cap off; Dennison unbolted the turret; as he spun a bolt he felt for his automatic; leaning down he yelled at Zinc:

”Have we any grenades?”

”No grenades.”

Outside, in the protection of the tank, they saw that their shovels were still wired to the cab. They thought of putting the bus in action. Could be safer than wandering. What about the battery? Gas but not enough juice. Splashing in water they walked a few steps.

”Hopeless,” said Dennison.

”Leave the damn thing.”

Crewmen appeared–stepped out of the dark, the sky coloration on their helmets: there appeared to be eight or ten, plastered with mud, sopping, their flashlights hooded. A guy loosened his helmet strap and said:

”I’m Captain Kernie. You two alone?”

”Bogged down … our bus…”

”No battery power,” said Dennison.

”Gas?”

”Yeah, we lost two tanks … nearby … hey, Walt, get a battery … get Mack to help you … bring a battery … we’ll put this bus back in action…”

”Captain went for help, hours ago,” Dennison said.

”What about the machine gun emplacement?” Zinc asked.

”My guys wiped it out … crew’s dead,” said Kernie.

”Good.”

”There’s timber … logs … by the woods … We’ll put your bus on rollers … have her out in no time.”

Zinc unwired a shovel.

”We’re in luck,” said Dennison mournfully.

Light crept over Kernie's face, then face and light went. His men placed scraps, logs, branches, replaced the battery, the engine fired. Cab light went on. Zinc reloaded his gun–sleep at his elbows.

9 backfired, rocked, rolled, apple cores bobbed on the floor, floated toward the rear. Easing the bus forward, on a rise, the water began to drain. Someone in Kernie's gang banged on the driving port.

Dennison worked her to the starboard, slipping, slipping; but she began to climb, stuck, climbed. With a wild teetering the treads grabbed and rolled away, rolled steadily downhill, to solid ground. Kernie and his crewmen had melted away.

Zinc stood beside Dennison.

He mopped the periscope with a rag.

In the cab light, dial light, they smiled at each other.

The down terrain held tough: the land had been tilled but was sodded: 9 rolled through a maze of vineyards and truck gardens. When a hedgerow blocked their way, Dennison sliced through it, slewing. He followed the remains of a paved road. Smoke mushroomed. Instinctively, he wobbled the tank. A shell hole gaped. Then another. A shell careened, spraying shrapnel. The cushion crushed against Dennison's testicles and pain tore through his body and magnified the roar of the engine and the treads. Nauseated, he could not see: blobs shook in his brain. Bending over, he closed the ignition.

A shell threw dirt and rocks onto 9.

Mouth open, both waited, clinging to their seats.

Another shell whined, then became a rumble.

His will drained from him: the nerves in his arms and hands ached: he tried to talk to himself as earth spouted over the port side, another shell at the rear. Something rattled and clanged. Light spat: every aperture admitted flame: it glazed their hands, their faces, the walls, the instruments. Shrapnel pounded blows.

Recoiling, Zinc's brain slid in on itself, whimpering, grimacing like a monkey, something Neanderthalic: he doubled up on the floor by the engine, head on his arms, legs jerking: death was here!

Dennison jabbed his hands into his stomach: Christ, not to vomit. Opening his mouth over and over, he tried to lessen the concussions.

Why can't it stop? Stop ... yes ... this muck ... those arms in the sand, those flies on Robinson's arms ... dust, all that heat, arms, hands, wrists, arms ... we got away ... we got away ... got to get away from this ... I'm comin, back, Jean ... I'm going mad, Chuck and I.

"No, Zinc, I'm all right. Okay, the shelling's stopped ... I'll drive ... we'll make it out of this!"

What, what was this?

It was Paris … and they were stripping her in the street, the beautiful Princesse de Lamballe … they were hacking off her breasts … they were hacking off her legs … Do you speak French? May I help you, mademoiselle? Long live the guillotine! *Vive la révolution!*

Dennison saw his dad lying on the floor of his little Renault: he was seriously wounded: nobody was helping him: his tank lay on its side.

Dennison was urinating on the floor.

He would not drive the tank again: he would refuse to drive any tank: what could they do? They could do their damnedest and he would go AWOL. But now, now the shelling had stopped, just cut itself off, leaving a ditch of silence.

He tried to figure out the cessation: it seemed to him it was his duty to figure it out: he must unravel enigmas, supply answers. That was what life was for.

The bent springs in the cushion bored into his back and he leaned forward and wet his lips with his tongue. Fingers and arms trembling, he cupped his head in his hands, closed his eyes.

Miraculously–he felt he was a boy, playing the game he used to play, playing soldiers on the living room floor: he had his troop in line and rolled something against them and they reeled and fell, the entire line fell.

And something else: the half-frozen needle of a phonograph was spinning music for their skating on Beebe Lake, light-hearted music. The chimes of the library tower struck ten o'clock in solemn notes. A girl was skating with him, Cathy Bowers: her slip-on sweater hugged her, they hugged each other, circling the lake quickly, their skates scraping softly.

But it was over …

The barrage was over; yet he could not stir; he began to count the minutes on the chronometer; the greenish face of the chronometer was trying to say something; he inched forward a little, inched more, pushed the brake lever. Presently, he considered all of the dials:

Got to check, got to see where the shell hit us, got to estimate … estimate the damage … got to climb out … put on my flash … climb …

He signalled Zinc with his flash; Zinc responded; together they left the bus, the air acrid with smoke, as if burned in a filthy oven, raw with slugged mud.

At the bow, with dimmed lights, they stooped over the starboard tread. Then the port tread. Plates had been torn out and the entire tread had been folded back like a strip of hide: there was no power there: they could do nothing to restore mobility.

Dennison motioned Zinc inside the cab.

"I'll destroy our maps," he said.

”What? Couldn’t hear you.”

He could not repeat himself.

Risking interior lights, he gathered the maps, ripped them into shreds, tramped them underfoot. Thinking of clips for his automatic he shoved them into his pocket. His helmet. Jacket. Was that all? No canteen? No thermos? No apples?

”Okay,” he said.

”The ammunition,” Zinc yelled.

”Leave it.”

”Not much ... outside.”

He hurled his belts; Dennison threw out Landel’s shells; the floor was a mess of sludge and they slipped as they worked.

”Put out the lights.”

”Lights out.”

Behind the bus they crouched down for cigarettes: as Zinc lit his fag something expanded inside him: a vague, battered sense of freedom: freedom? He wasn’t sure what kind it might be. He sucked in smoke, looked up: something was there?

Dennison felt no loss: he had had enough of 9: enough, enough, that thought continued as they slogged down a slope: he was sorry for his Isaac Jacobs, so small, so vulnerable: he led him across barren fields, toward the Roer, expecting shellfire, expecting death.

It was a long way to the Roer River, black-walking. They had to avoid corpses, had to avoid barbed wire, shell holes: their dimmed lights were sometimes useless. They thought they remembered a farm house and argued about it, then stumbled on, uncertain. Seeing lights they became more cautious, stopping, waiting, listening. MP’s challenged them, and one of them acted as guide to the remnants of their division.

Men from the Corps had bedded down in a barn; they might be crowded there; somebody suggested the country church: there was room at the rear: shellfire had blasted the small, gothic thing: its altar was a contrivance of boards and tarp and cross. They entered through a gaping wall. Windows of antique glass remained: blue, rose, yellow, mauve against the night. Both stopped to see leaded glass on bits of steel.

Dennison recognized Landel, woebegone on a pew, his head and neck bandaged, face drawn, hand to his mouth, his beard peppered with grey. A medic was adjusting his neck bandage, talking.

Dennison had hoped Landel was dead.

He refrained from speaking to him: motionless, wanting to sit or lie down, he rubbed his hands over his jacket, unsteady, hating his grime: he smelt his own

stench: he craved a drink. Zinc, too, hesitated, ready to buckle from fatigue.

GI's sprawled on pews, lay in the aisles, sat on the altar platform: they were sleeping, eating, talking, smoking, bedding down. The beautiful window had died. Coleman lanterns sputtered on tables, pews, ledges. Dennison and Zinc headed for the altar where there seemed to be space to lie down. Before they could reach it, Fred Landel saw them, approached them.

"Hey, you guys!" he shouted, his neck injury paining him. "What's eating you? How'd you make out?"

Zinc faced about, without a word, helmetless, his filthy face and clothes a little dirtier than most of the others.

Dennison looked at Landel scornfully.

Landel's eyes were bloodshot; he, too, was filthy, mud-spattered; he raised an arm, stopped, resentful of his crewmen, aware, by their attitudes, they had marked him off.

"Couldn't find help ... shrapnel hit me..." Why should I make excuses: can't they see? "What happened to 9?"

"Tank's done for," Dennison yelled.

"You guys just walk off and leave it?"

"Naw, we put it in mothballs!" Zinc cracked.

Landel took a long look at him.

"Shell hit us ... we lost a tread," said Dennison.

"Lost a tread," Zinc repeated, smiling, knowing that sleep was going to knock him out at any moment.

"I'll get us another machine," Landel yelled.

Pain was flashing through his head; he walked to a pew and sank down on it, moaning. Far off, he heard Dennison say something about getting washed, getting something to eat, Landel wasn't sure.

Okay ... okay ... am I crackin' up? There were slits in the floor, cracks, slits ... a cockroach was busy ... there had been swarms of cockroaches in Panama, cockroaches, fever, heat. Arm hooked over his eyes, lying on the pew, he sank into a fitful sleep.

Dennison and Zinc found a wash basin and some soap, and then ate, ate without exchanging a word, nine of them at a table made out of a door, an army cook doling grub: the men humped over their food, jaws mechanical: stew ... canned peaches ... bread ... coffee.

Dennison hoped that food would stop a cramp in his belly. His eyes fixed on a fork: it seemed to him that the tines were moving, the handle was forming a half circle. Something peeled off in his mind: he felt he was at home: the fork had a "D" on it: Mama was humming in the kitchen: there were candles on their dining table: he felt about in his pocket for a pack of matches to light them.

More GI's jammed the church, most of them yammering for food.

"Jesus Chriz ... if it ain't Dennison! Hiya!"

"Hi, Pete ... Hi, Vic ... ,"

Pete and Vic were tankmen out of Sherman 446, grizzled, smiling, punch drunk; they had participated in attacks with Dennison, always helpful: both were New Yorkers, Vic had been a physics major at NYU, Pete was a cutter, in a suit shop, in Harlem.

"How did you guys make out?" Pete asked.

"We lost our bus."

"9?"

"Yeah." Dennison was biting a section of a peach.

"What's news about the minefield?" Zinc asked.

"We lost twenty-three," said Vic, squeezing himself in at the table.

"Twenty-three tanks?" yelled Dennison.

"Twenty-three men," Vic said. "Wounded ... dead ... don't know how many..." Elbows on the table he covered his face with his hands. Near him a pot of stew was puffing.

"It's been a hell of a day!" said Pete, standing behind Dennison. "They had their minefield planned ... they know they're licked but they make us fight on and on. Dumb. All that waste of life." He picked his nose mournfully, his bleary eyes on the crowded church, the milling GI's, the men at the door-table.

"Bretten's ours," said a lieutenant at the table. "We took it a couple hours ago."

"Will there be street fighting?" someone asked.

"I don't know."

"Jus' lemme sleep," said Zinc, liking his cup of coffee. God, it smelled good.

"The Germans are burning their towns as they retreat," someone said.

"We've got them on the run!" said Vic.

Vic and Pete ate, others left the table, an officer was asleep over his food; medics sat down, complaining of lack of supplies.

Dennison and Zinc bedded down on hay and straw, a light from a Coleman somewhere in the distance, Red Cross men aiding the wounded, a GI on guard, in case of fire. Soon every sag in the hay and straw slept a man. A sergeant had his bazooka beside him. Someone, screwed up in his fatigues, curled up tight as a ball, had a puppy in his arms.

There was no such thing as a peaceful interval: men came and went throughout the night: a wounded man died: a patrol was lugged in on a stretcher: doctors whispered and hovered: toward morning there was a lull and during that lull water began to spread throughout the church. Someone thought it was the rain ... but it was not raining. The fire guard saw straw drifting on the water, then

he observed a man's boot floating by: getting up he splashed about, mumbling, asking questions, mumbling:

"Lie still over there ... I'll find out what's wrong ... no, it ain't rainin' ... maybe it poured somewhere nearby ... sure a lot a water comin' in from somewhere..."

With his flash he waded outside: water had inundated the yard in front of the church and it seemed to be inches deep: as the guard stood on the lowest step a GI splashed by, with a lantern, rifle crooked in his arm.

"Heh, what's up?"

"River's flooding," the GI bellowed.

Someone with a racking cough warned the guard the Roer was rising rapidly: Nazi's are flooding us out. Inside the church the guard began waking men, asking everyone to spread the word: already the water was ankle deep. The wounded had to be shifted at once. Lights and flashlights took over. All of the pews had water around them.

The general hubbub woke Dennison.

"We're being flooded out," someone explained.

Dennison woke Zinc.

Grabbing his shoes and jacket, he scrambled higher on the pile of straw and hay; putting on his shoes he hollered at the men around him.

"Where do we go?"

"Outside."

"What for?"

"Everybody out!"

"Almost dawn."

"Yeah, gettin' light."

Dennison spotted Landel and waded across flooded straw to wake him: he woke with a groan and grabbed at his head and neck.

"We're being flooded ... it's the Nazis ... they've opened steel flood gates up the river ... the Roer's flooding ... it's on the radio," Dennison shouted.

Icy water eddied about Landel's pew where other men lay: the swift moving water carried straw, hay, a man's jacket, wood chips, towels, bandages.

"Too many flashlights!" somebody yelled.

"Douse the lights!"

"Give a guy a chance!"

"There's a hill behind the church ... everybody's going there!"

Men were evacuating GI's on stretchers.

Outside, it was cold but windless, the stars were numerous around a new moon. A jeep soused through the rising flood, its black-out lights weak. Shelling had resumed but it was in the distance. Lights flickered behind the ruined church:

at the rear of the building a truck was loading wounded.

Dennison returned to the church to aid a wounded youngster who had a serious stomach laceration: he got him a new blanket, water, and found him an orderly ...

" ... got hit at a minefield ... got me bad ... Eeee ... not hard, Doc. Not so hard, like ... Eeee..."

The orderly very abrupt, very savage, told the tanker to shut up, lie down.

The fellow stared at Dennison and then at the medic: he stared beardedly at the ceiling as the doctor gave him an injection: he had the face of someone who had suffered malnutrition most of his life.

"See if you can get him into a truck or ambulance," the doctor suggested, limping off through the icy water.

Dennison secured stretcher bearers.

Landel had disappeared. Zinc was nowhere. Someone squawked a walkie-talkie and the two-way sputtering began as officers conferred by the tarpaulined altar, water already at the steps; all lights had dimmed; it was almost day.

Going outside to piss, Dennison heard a puppy whimpering; at first he could not see it, then there it was, at his feet, padding through muck. Lifting it, he recognized it as the stray the officer had been holding. The collie pup's belly and paws were cold; it cried and snuggled; Dennison popped it underneath his jacket. He was comforting it when Zinc tapped him on the arm.

" ... Radio says that sluice gates on the Roer were opened during the night ... our whole area is flooded ... hell ... You an' me an' Landel are to transport wounded guys in a Lee." Zinc was playing with the pup's ears. "Where'd you pick up this lil guy?"

"Here ... in the water."

"Whatcha gonna do with him?"

"Stash him in the church ... leave him..."

"The river's a mile or two wide in places," Zinc said.

"Do you know where the tank is–the one we're to use?"

"Sure ... I know."

"Let's go," Dennison said. Reentering the church, he placed the pup on a pew. "Gotta go, old boy ... gotta go ... just stay there and yelp."

A lingering glance at the antique windows, then he followed Zinc toward the hill behind the church: a ditch drenched them to the knees: swearing, they floundered ahead, past a group of tanks, to the Lee, higher on the slope, out of the menacing flood water.

"That's her!" Zinc yelled.

"Okay."

Fred Landel was inside, in the driver's seat, warming the motor: the cab

was jammed with wounded, some standing, leaning against walls, some on the floor, huddled against each other.

"Where do we go?" Dennison asked Landel, mouth to his ear.

"You drive!" said Landel. "We go to Gex … I have the map … I know the route … take a long look at those red lines; let's pull out of this goddamn place … lights out … we leave the wounded at a Red Cross station … (he jabbed the map with his forefinger) … I'll let you know … sit down … check the dials … lights out … this bus has had it rough…"

As they got rolling, the sunlight was filtering, but the clouds were thick and seemed on the verge of blanketing the sun. Dennison drove carefully, trying to familiarize himself with the Lee: he had piloted others but this one was different and he wanted to work out any differences; the engine power, the tread maneuverability, gear shift, traction, carburetion? He had tried to memorize the route and compelled his mind to re-establish landmarks.

God, it was raining!

Rain and more mud, lousy traction, anything to foul us up! The Lee was climbing a slope, doing well: no flooding here. Beyond this slope there was supposed to be a road; he was to follow that paved road, toward Gex. Yeah, there it was … a road, trees, fences, farms in the distance.

"You'll have to help me," a fellow screamed, grabbing at Dennison's leg. "It's my knee … shrapnel … Aaah-hhh!" Pain-sobs gushed out of him as he pawed at Dennison. Dennison slowed and stopped the tank.

"Let me see your knee," he yelled.

His kneecap was dangling, bleeding: Dennison and Landel could do no more than press it into position, re-bandage. Dennison crouched beside him, using his flashlight: again and again he was aware of leaves, leaves and sunlight: he was not sure where. The GI was sobbing.

A Red Cross official beat on the forward door; Landel admitted him; somehow he managed to find room, his face rain streaked, satchel in his arms, a bayou figure: the gaze fixed on some everglade of the mind.

Okay, Landel signalled.

Okay.

Landel felt the jolting of the bus: pain, from his neck wound, was beating through him.

"Where?" the Red Cross man asked.

"Gex."

The Lee crawled by a winery, a bombed complex, dinosaur ribs of buildings, passed rows of barrels, tall grass waving in the rain: some of the barrels were moulded: the road curved in a long curve; there, at the apex of the curve, was the Red Cross station, aerial designation and the familiar flag. No one appeared.

An ambulance had a jack under its differential.

Landel, Zinc and Dennison assisted the wounded; they climbed out; Landel climbed back into heat, began checking their armament, began arming his gun.

Dennison glared numbly at a strip of black sky as he drove away. Zinc fussed about with his gun, pleased that he had space to move around. Landel, making every effort to shake his pain, hanging to the sides of his seat, was remembering Panama, nights of pleasantry, dancing, *Cuba Libres*, marimbas, time, that was the time, time for a cigarette, time for a drink.

A shell boomed in front.

Widening his ports, Dennison observed a Sherman ejecting shoelaces of black smoke; as he drew nearer flames spouted and enveloped the tank completely.

Go on, came the signal.

Dennison leaned back in his seat and wet his lips with his tongue ... destroy ... shall we destroy?

I suppose there's a lot of tall grass in Wisconsin.

She wants ...

The terrain is solid ... no road ... fields ... Gex is a mile or so in front ... the radio was crackling ... Landel at the dials ... the Lee rolled and rolled again ... they passed under trees ... they passed a giant barn with two cows visible in a stall ... there were no hedgerows ... they passed a country school ... they passed a row of burning homes and rolled into Gex ...

Gex ... Gex ... what about the guys who had burned to death in that Sherman?

Gex ...

God, it was raining hard.

An awkward four-legged windmill was batting at the rain.

"Gex, Gex!" exclaimed Landel, and closed his eyes and hung on, worried that the gas indicator was so low.

Gex was smoke and paved streets and ravaged buildings, a man fleeing, a gunnysack over his shoulder. Girders jabbed out of ripped apartments. Burning beams smoked in cottages. In a hotel fire escapes were twisted. Again more smoke ...

A squad of riflemen sniped from a smashed grocery.

"Get them," Landel ordered.

Their guns began to pound and Dennison wormed his bus closer and closer to the grocery: the bow crushed its windows and wall: the bow seemed to be raiding for meat and potatoes. Gunfire shredded the glass counters. Machinegun bullets cut down the store's sign: it fell. Bullets tore into a refrigerator.

No riflemen escaped.

A narrow street, trees along one side ...

Dennison read *bakery* and *meat market* and wondered when he would sidle up to a counter and order a loaf of whole wheat..."four center-cut pork chops." And in the coffee shop, how about liverwurst and beer?

What a way to enter a town! Gex: who wanted Gex? What would the USA do with Gex? Right now, a beefsteak was worth more!

"Who's that guy?" he yelled on the intercom.

A helmeted GI blocked a doorway in a ruined building and flagged the tank; other GI's spewed from an aperture left by a shell; Dennison hesitated to stop the Lee under the riddled wall, yet he obeyed.

Inside de-ribbed apartments he saw a fireplace, book shelves, shoes on a carpeted floor, clothes on wardrobe hangers, a toilet ... on a brass plate: Dr. Horace Kreutger, *Child Specialist.* A church dome glistened in a sewage of light.

The helmeted GI in the doorway was signalling ...

Starboard ... sharpshooters ... balcony ... port.

Dennison sent the bus to the port, crawled over garbage in an alley, saw a piece of sky, and then the sharpshooters on a grilled balcony.

Zinc fired and a fellow sagged to his knee, another dropped his rifle on the balcony floor, another began dragging a wounded comrade, both crawling on hands and knees: the wounded man seemed to be shouting: his dentures popped from his mouth, bounced and smashed in the street. Landel killed the remaining pair.

A GI appeared, wig-wagging, a walkie-talkie in his big, hairy arms, his helmet cockeyed. Reporting into his w-t he paced the Lee; as it swung onto a main street, the motor responded sluggishly, as if running out of gas, and Dennison worked the choke. As he glanced through the periscope he noticed the GI walking on the sidewalk, swinging one arm, talking as he walked. A shell exploded: the GI, his w-t, bones and flesh splattered across the walk. Another 77 blew up the paving in front of the Lee: a roof collapsed, mixing steel and concrete.

Dennison reversed.

Following the main street, deserted shops and stores on both sides, he saw something drop from a second floor–a mattress. It fell across the tank's prow, swayed, fell again.

Dennison rammed an empty swastika jeep. From second floors machine guns raked a GI patrol, wiping it out, the men dying in the gutters.

Telephone wires whipped around a lamppost.

It was no longer raining.

Landel began directing Zinc: their guns accounted for several SS outside a drugstore. Waiting for smoke to clear, Dennison moved along the street where machine gunners were mounting their gun in a building named Zorn: ZORN was

carved on the façade in tall letters: under shellfire, Zorn crumbled as they passed.

For Dennison, the grief of other attacks was returning, muddled, violent, hobnailing his brain.

This is our last attack, he told himself: gasoline low: stop: not any more: not any more: Gex is a ruin: we'll be able to rest ... rest ... a little rest ...

Mouth open, he longed for a cool drink, remembering the apple cores floating on the floor of 9.

Who was that walking along the street?

Jeannette, get off the street!

Jean ... what are you doing here?

Can't you hear me?

Oh, Christ, my head!

He bent forward and wet his lips with his tongue.

Before he could stop the tank it plowed into a wall and stopped with a great shock. Landel screamed. Zinc fell. Landel grabbed hold of Dennison and beat him with his fists, the pain in his wound galloping through his body. He sobbed and babbled; Zinc had to yank him off, and restrain him.

"What's wrong with you? What's wrong with you?" Landel shouted.

Dennison could not figure out what had happened: he could not understand why the Lee was out of action: he asked Zinc if they had been hit.

In spite of his deafness, he heard Landel ask:

"Why did you ram the wall?"

"Do what?"

"Why did you hit the wall?"

Dennison waited for several seconds.

"I don't know what happened."

"You rammed into this wall–you fool!"

"I went blank."

"Let 'im alone!" Zinc shouted.

"Shut up!" Landel yelled.

"I went blank .... that's all," Dennison repeated.

They rested a few minutes and then began creeping along, patrolling the main street, under radio orders, their guns silent, the enemy nowhere. Stopping at a barricaded intersection, where trees had fallen under bombing, where heaps of rubble smoked, the radio announced the official take-over of Gex.

They were radio-ordered to park with other machines under trees fringing a town garden: roses and shell holes, benches and crushed benches, paths that stopped suddenly: a small bronze figure was still upright under branches: the three men crawled from their cab and sat on a low stone wall, faces black, clothes grease-caked, bloody.

Zinc showed Dennison a gashed hand.
"How did you get hit?"
"Oh ... I dunno."
"Need some iodine?"
"Umm."
"Open your hand."
"Can't."
"Open it, Isaac."
Zinc grinned boyishly.

Tenderly, Dennison opened Zinc's hand; he found an emergency kit in the Lee and cleaned the wound: all of the time he felt the fresh air on his face and realized he was breathing something worth breathing. He promised himself he would soon have something to eat.

"Shall I bandage it tighter?"
"No ... like it is."
"Okay now?"
"Yeah ... but awful tired."
"Me too."
"Where's Landel?"
"Gone for water."
"Ah."
A little later, Zinc said:
"I'm gonna marry Millie when I get back."
"What?" Dennison cried.
"Nuthin'."
Landel offered them water from a thermos.
"I've had some ... it's okay."
Zinc drank, Dennison drank, then it went the rounds once more.
"I'm beat," Landel said.
They nodded.

That night, after grub, they slept in a handsome 17th century residence near the park, in a bedroom on the second floor, under elegant drapes, elegant table cloths, in mahogany beds: a silent place, gilded wallpaper, ormolu furniture, golden carpet. Before falling asleep, Zinc washed and scrubbed with perfumed soap in a basin painted with forget-me-nots. In his sleep he thought of his boat, an ephemeral boat, but it was his boat ... he dreamed of a wedding ceremony, people tossing rice ... his injured hand relaxed ... but his face burned and his head throbbed violently from time to time.

Landel slept uneasily in his bed, a feverish night: he had gulped down aspirin from the emergency kit, then he added codeine, a double dose in the

night: tomorrow, he asked himself, tomorrow? He was unsure. How could he continue?

For Dennison it was a problem to relax: he floated on his mattress, under the layers of drapery: his subconscious was uncomfortable: he heard his mother say:

”I think we’ve had more snow this year than we’ve had for years.”

Of course this was played back a number of times.

In another dream a man whispered:

”Jeannette ... Jean...”

She was sitting on the grass by a lake, a picnic basket beside her, a blue scarf around her head: her eyes were marvelously blue: she was smiling: she was saying with her smile: come on, lunch is ready, let’s eat.

”Darling,” he said, aloud.

He awoke, shivering, angry with himself for having slept without his jacket. Putting it on, he climbed back into bed, and pulled the draperies closer, a rumble of low-flying bombers shaking the room.

... They continued to fight in Germany.

... Christmas was dead and gone.

... Time?

Eight Shermans boiled along an *autobahn*, the paving was excellent, one gradual curve sliding into another. Telephone lines, on stubby poles, wandered across fields into a weak sun. Villages lay upside down in a river.

As he drove, Dennison thought of shaving, recalled the whiff of Yardley soap, the rasp of his razor. Maybe, someday, somewhere, an electric shaver ... maybe after shave lotion ... maybe ...

He was doing thirty-five, thirty-seven, third in line, in the left lane. Heat boiled on its endless tread; noise rushed under the floor, rushed overhead, rushed along the walls.

They had a new crewman, a fellow from Chicago, a swarthy, husky outfielder, smart, good-natured, with a shock of black hair and black eyes: Paul Murphy; PM, the guys called him.

PM was hanging onto Dennison’s driving seat as the freeway peeled by: he was reading the speedometer, tickled by Dennison’s skill and recklessness. His eyes glistened; there was a silly grin on his face; he wanted to be able to drive a tank like this. As the bus rocked along smoothly, approaching fifty, he waved his arm at Zinc.

But Landel was squirming, resentful of such speed: he could think of a dozen reasons for disaster: his neck ached and he did not look forward to a ghastly jolt. For several weeks he had been sneaking off, drinking heavily, talking little: he was involved in the art of deception–the alcoholic's art. He bellowed through the phone, "cut your speed," then slumped against the armor plate, mouthing a small flask.

He bellowed again, this time at PM, signalling him to his machine gun.

God, Dennison thought, he doesn't leave anybody alone.

Dennison had requested a transfer–any unit: after his injury at the Roer River, Landel was often violent, word and action. He often fell asleep on duty. During some of his binges he went homo.

"Maybe he figured I was someone else," Dennison told Zinc. "Did he come at you?"

"Sure ... sure! But, lord, I haven't cracked up yet! We'll wrangle transfers, you and I. Have to..."

The driver in front of Dennison was losing speed: he was far to the right, too close to the shoulder.

"Steady, steady," Dennison mumbled to himself. "If you go slower, make it steady ... watch yourself."

What's the number on his turret: 6 ... 7 ... 67? Is that right? The 67 was nearly obliterated. The tank's armor was rust colored, mud and grease smeared, but somebody, at a depot or relay point, had slapped on yellow paint across one side and it was as though the machine sported a yellow crab, its pincers toward the prow.

So Chuck Hitchcock killed himself in a Brooklyn hospital! ... poor guy! Made it to the fire escape, blind as he was! Ten floors. God, to drop ten floors. Three seconds. Right on a paved driveway. He was out of his mind. Perhaps not. Dennison had Jeannette's note–dirty and crumpled–in his billfold. Had it for days, unable to reply. Where was he to get it mailed? In Berlin? What was there to say? What did she expect? Dear Jean: so sorry your brother bumped himself off! With those sightless eyes of his, what could he do? Not even Cyclops!

Better off.

With a jerk, 67 swung violently to starboard: its starboard tread left the highway, and the machine seemed to balance on one tread, race on one; then the highway shoulder crumbled and the bus spun over and over into a gravelled ditch, to stop bottom-up: the whole thing registering on Dennison, sucked inside his brain through his driving viewer.

"Tank over!" he bellowed, braking his machine gradually. He yanked Landel's arm, and shook it. "She'll catch fire," he bellowed. "Landel ... 67's in the ditch! Rolled over fast! Can we open her hatches?"

He was yelling at himself.

Landel was alert.

A tread of their tank sank and Dennison yanked her straight, centered her on the road, slowed, and brought her to a halt behind 67, smoke belching from the upended machine.

Sweat was running down his face and he wiped it off as he unstrapped his seatbelt.

The blow must have stunned 67's crew: Ben was there: his shoulder injury would cripple him: Carson was there ...

The men were dumped together between machine guns, cannon, ammunition, thermos, gasoline, wrenches, oil, heat.

Dennison was alongside the Lee.

From their firebox at the rear, he grabbed two Pyrenes: he handed one to Zinc and raced for 67, slipping on mud: he dropped the extinguisher but snatched it and squirted chemicals on the yellow paint smear, on the turret.

"Somebody get a shovel ... hunt for a crowbar ... tear open ... let them out! Smoke's choking them ... they can't see a thing!

"Here, PM, squirt this on the motor area," he shouted: he realized that PM could not hear and he shoved the extinguisher into his hands.

He began to unwire a crowbar from his own machine, his fingers awkward; he tried to steady himself; smoke was ballooning; the Pyrenes were whitening the smoke. Using all his strength he wrenched off the bar and rushed back to 67. Machinegun bullets were bursting inside. Now Landel was discharging an extinguisher.

PM had run back to his bus. Now he nosed 67 over: with a huge thud, and a great cloud of white smoke, she flopped onto her side. Another tankman attempted to beat open a driving slot, to admit air.

Handkerchief over his face, Dennison climbed onto 67, to force a hatch. Somebody might be there, ready to be dragged out. Hell, the guys couldn't see!

Raising his bar he rammed it: smoke blinded him but he struck again: the steel rebounded: there was less smoke: he struggled to breathe: probably they were dead: Carson, Ben, Townsend, Lee, Arthur. Yet there might be a chance ... must be a chance ... must be ...

Slipping, he fell off the tank and somebody helped him up, and he whirled for one of the forward ports. Sweat drenched his hands and face. He gripped the bar tighter and drove at the little door and it seemed to give and he hammered at it again, coughing.

I've got a crack ... lean forward ... hit closer to the rim ... can't see ...

His handkerchief dropped. He couldn't stop coughing. When smoke blew away he looked about and saw that nobody was using the extinguishers: were

they empty? Everyone had backed away.

Goddammit ... I'll open that starboard door ... I'll hack it open with my bare hands!

He rammed and the door yielded. He slammed at it again and it gave a hair. He hit it again with every ounce of muscle. His hands slipped and he almost toppled.

He hit nearer the lock: a steel shaving gave way: hurling himself against the bar, the lock snapped; he pressed down, and the door opened.

Breathing in gasps, he threw the little door wide.

Smoke, black smoke, crawled out of the cab.

Crewmen pushed Dennison aside and crowded close to 67. Leaning against his tank, Dennison watched them, unseeing, unmoving: glad to be away from 67. He wanted water but could not ask for it. In spite of himself he vomited green slime.

Too late ... there's nothing anybody can do ... I was too late.

Nobody can crawl inside: the guys are dead: they've been dead for ... it's done: it's over: maybe that's something:

"It's over," he yelled.

Ben and his injured shoulder: Ben said he was going to get well: Ben was majoring in math ...

Carson was a nice guy ...

Arthur said I'm the one and future king ...

Dennison coughed and blinked and walked about and wet his lips with his tongue.

"You nearly got yourself killed," Landel barked at Dennison. He waved his fire extinguisher at 67. "They're dead ... fried to a crisp ... you were a damn fool!"

Dennison barely understood ... he nodded.

Rubbing his eyes, he tried to lessen the sting of the smoke, the acid of burning rubber, the force of fear ... Presently, he saw Zinc beside him with a canteen of water in his hands.

"Drink."

He helped Dennison swab his face and sop his neck, his own hands trembling; he appeared a little idiotic without his helmet, his hair going every which way, but he smiled insanely. Grease streaked his forehead and beard and one ear was blobbed with oil.

All tanks had halted: tankmen sat and lay on the freeway or on the shoulder: the sun was ugly in a salve-like cloud: in a woodland a B-29 hung in some trees, strips of wing metal flashing.

Harold Stragoni, in one of the last tanks to pull up, hurried to Dennison and Zinc.

”Is that your tank ... did you lose your tank?”

”No.”

”67 turned over ... burned.”

”Hit by a shell?”

”Turned over.”

PM came up.

”I looked inside ... with my flash ... they’re incinerated to nuthin’ ... clothes all burned ... It’s too hot to climb inside...”

Zinc inspected the machine: walking around it, he noticed the yellow paint, flaked grease, dented armor, damaged cannon, a broken grouser. In Akron there had been a truck crash, the cab catching fire–this same incineration. In spite of that vivid Ohio memory he wanted a glimpse of Arthur–no matter how charred. Arthur was a man ... but Zinc could not identify anyone: just reddish stuff, a leather helmet, a hand, guns. Sadly, he rejoined Dennison and they lit cigarettes.

”There was a broken grouser ... maybe that caused ’er to flip,” said Zinc mournfully.

”Maybe.”

Landel fished his binocular from its case; focusing it he scrutinized the woodland, the intervening fields, a remote farm, its heap of manure, haystacks.

”We ought to bury our guys,” someone said.

”Yeah ... let’s bury them,” Stragoni said, filling his pipe, shaking tobacco back into a leather pouch.

”Nobody’s gonna bury them!” Landel yelled. ”They’re buried already.” Fools for sentiment. ”We’ve got to shove out of here. We’ll be spotted ... our buses all along the highway!”

Near a wire gate he caught a solitary figure: the figure reminded him of his father before they imprisoned him: the field man had the same defeated air, the same stoop.

Their company commander, Colonel Fraser, bumped up in a fast jeep: he and his staff did not have much to say: his brown, middle-aged face expressed great chagrin: maps under his arm he checked 67, one of his lieutenants scribbling in a field book.

”You were right behind her,” he said to Landel. ”Did you see her go over?”

”I didn’t see her go over.”

”I saw her ... she seemed to travel on one tread ... drop to the shoulder ... maybe a broken tread,” Dennison said.

Landel grasped the Colonel’s shoulder:

”Here, here ... look...”

He pressed his binocular into Fraser’s hand.

”See ... see that M129, dangling in those trees ... they’re readying a mortar

there ... we've got to clear out!"

He began gesturing, calling to the crewmen:

"Out of here ... everybody ... into the tanks ... mortar fire!"

He hustled from man to man. By the time Fraser had spotted the mortar, Landel had men bee-lining.

Fraser ordered the tanks to roll. He and his staff piled into their jeep.

Dennison tossed the crowbar onto the floor of their machine, swung into the bus, dropped wearily onto the driving seat. He permitted himself time for a long, long swig: water was incredible. When you're dead you don't drink much, he told himself. He passed the canteen to Zinc who passed it to Landel.

"Goddamn the Wehrmacht!" Landel shouted.

Water wet his fingers and wrists, rolled off oil and grease.

"What hellish luck!" Dennison shouted.

"Let's go!" Landel yelled.

Switch on, the cylinders whammed into action; other tanks had raced ahead; in an instant Dennison passed 67; as they roared on a mortar shell exploded far from its target, geysering dirt.

This section of the *autobahn* had been shelled and Dennison kept the bus at thirty, leery of potholes, treads rolling in unison, the motor synchronizing, the highway a slant of light.

Jeez, he thought, we didn't get away any too soon!

He scrunched deeper into his seat, wanting to ease his shoulders: that crowbarring had been rough! Well, here was one up for Fred Landel, old eagle eye! The grumbling of the engine was satisfying. This bus was in order.

A sign read *8 K Olpe*.

"Olpe!" Dennison muttered through the phone.

"What?" Zinc yelled.

"Olpe ... Olpe lies ahead!"

He knew exactly what lay ahead because he had seen so many ruined towns: pulped houses, streets galled and scrambled, downed trees, power plant in bits, splintered telephone poles, church sheltering a crucifix.

Ten dead lay on the road: he recognized their uniforms: he knew, as he drove past them, that some of the men had been riding motorcycles and bicycles. Their motorcycles had swastikas on their sidecars.

The sign read *7 K Olpe*.

World world, went the treads.

Water dripping from a brown jar is white, he thought. Honey in a comb is thick. Goat's milk tastes strong. The desert is yellow in places, streaked, as though the *mistral* had ... yeah, and those fly-coated arms in the wadi...

Robinson's arms raced ahead on the *autobahn*, raced the tank, very white,

flecked with sand...

Chuck was good at assembling an automatic rifle...

How far was it he could throw a grenade?

Dennison's back was paining him more acutely: he felt the drag of the crowbar, the weight and friction of it:

Gonna be lame tomorrow, lame in my arms and back.

Tomorrow, tomorrow I'll be back in E ... I'll stroll along the Nonette ... that book in the attic ... Chateaubriand ... she had read *Atala* to him, dwelling on the most melancholy passages ... Atala's burial ... that book in the attic ... I'll re-read those passages ... book bound in red leather ... memories from ...

His head was throbbing as they entered Olpe, a yellow cat crouching in front of someone's empty cottage. It spat at the crewmen as they climbed out, parked to grab some air: the town was dead: alone, on a slab of masonry, Dennison rested his head on one hand. Other tanks rolled in, stopped. It would be dark in an hour or so. They would be eating soon?

How he wanted the roar of the tank to seep out of his brain, wanted some of the filth to ooze from his body.

He wanted a place alone. Better alone in this bombed town than never alone! Better to die in a field! A B-29 flying low, conspicuous ...

In Britain there had been Spitfires and De Havilands: constantly aloft: this B-29 was a reconnaissance plane circling lower and lower: the bomber was reaching a danger point: was it out of fuel, was the crew about to bale out?

Climbing a big mound of garbage he saw chutes billow; then came the twisting dive, smoke from the cockpit area as the plane went down. Five chutes were swaying, drifting. A black column headstoned the crash site. Dennison jumped from the garbage pile and informed some of the crewmen. At once several GI's took off, dog trotting through the dusk, toting small arms. Dennison was glad to run, glad to be on the go across a field–free of armor.

The first chute man, tangled in his chute, lying on his side, lying behind bushes, opened fire with his submachine gun, almost killing PM. Bullets cropped weeds and grass around him.

"Look, you goddamn ass! We're not Nazis!" shrieked PM, flat on his belly...

"How do I know who you are! Some of you bastards talk English," the airman yelled.

"Yeah, well, I'm from Chicago, see. I used to clean up the loop every day for eighteen bucks a week. Dee is my uncle. I'm in the 321st ... all of us are in the 321st. We just crawled into this lousy town. Put down your tommy gun: I'll show you some snapshots? Okay?"

"I guess so, but keep your hands up! Don't fuck around!"

In a moment they were shoulder-slapping and pumping hands; within a

short time the tankmen located three more flyers–one with a smashed leg. Someone hacked a willow and thin pine poles and Dennison and Zinc improvised a jacket litter.

On the way into Olpe they located the other flyer, his parachute shot down. Dennison was stung by his death: he felt the tragedy of his broken body: he looked into Zinc's face: but he was looking at something else: everyone here about the same age, Dennison thought: all trapped. Another kick from death! Death, lousy death, that insatiable hellion! He wanted to defy death. He wanted to kick it in the ass. He wanted the world to know what death was doing!

Smog was filtering over Olpe's dumpage: the brick and stone walls, a slate roof, the beams and plaster: nearly every structure had been shambled. Olpe had been known for its oil refinery but shelling had dug and re-dug earth, pipes, storage tanks, cracking gear.

They carried the pilot into a ruined inn: somebody had already explored the town and led them there: somebody rounded up a medic: Dennison, Zinc, Landel and PM bedded down in the low T-shaped building that still had a giant elm tree in front.

Debris was everywhere, broken dishes, broken window glass, dangling plaster, a disemboweled sofa, ripped out wiring, pulverized bricks and tiles: Dennison walked through the rooms as through a surrealist museum: finding burlap and a mattress he lay down and unbuttoned his trousers and scratched and then lay motionless.

No food had come.

One of the flyers hung a flashlight and its swaying light crawled about, expressing hate. Other crewmen bedded down. Dennison's mind had nothing to tell him so he wriggled underneath the sacking and hunger became his anesthesia. Turning his hands palm-up, he gazed at them, one at a time, dozed, and then slept.

Landel was vomiting from pain, lack of food, alcohol, and fatigue. Crouched in a corner, he had an empty bottle beside him.

Whiskey would help! He shrugged: who's Johnny Walker? Down in Panama, years ago, the gambling rooms of the Palacio Rivas had been fabulous: coco palms in a lush garden, macaws on perches, gardenias floating on the swimming pools … lovely whores … *copitas.* But he had gotten drunk and killed a man, shot him through the lungs and heart …

When the war ended he planned to settle in Germany and horn in on the black market graft: army supplies, PX supplies: sell, buy, swap: a sure way to stack up the dough!

PM was snoring.

Zinc lay on his side, watching one of the B-29 guys mess with his lighter: a

nearby tankman removed his shoes and sox and massaged his feet: Zinc felt the smallness of his body: other men had something to be proud of: muscles were jerking around his mouth: he rubbed the muscles halfheartedly: closing his eyes he tried to think of home but home had not existed for a long time. Mom had been dead for four or five years ... Millie ... where was she? He turned onto his back. It seemed to him his spine was injured. Certainly something was wrong with his stomach: there were too many aches there.

A cloudy moon hung above Olpe ... in the gutted inn night was eventful: food began arriving in the early hours: the old walls heard a few cheerful sounds; the smell of food roused some of the men.

Sometime in the night Landel woke, chilled, afraid: he couldn't find a cigarette and woke Dennison and asked him for his pack. He tried to talk to him–wishing to talk about his past: most of all he simply wanted to talk. Drags on his Luckies helped. He found a blanket. That helped. With Dennison lying nearby he thought of admitting what a bastard he was and yet that seemed stupid: everything seemed stupid, everything was stupid, torn apart, like Olpe.

Under the ribs of an adjoining building–a long shed–fifteen or twenty tankmen ate breakfast, fog around them: fog had seeped in with a yellowish thickness, a thickness that seemed related to old masonry, old walls and crumbling plaster. The eaters appreciated the hot food, untroubled by the fog; as they ate they simply stared.

Go to Morb ... Panzers ... Serious.

That was the morning radio directive: the Corps was dispatched onto the *autobahn* again, now crammed with one-way military and civilian traffic. It began to drizzle as the Shermans and Lees grumbled forward; then the drizzle changed to a downpour that sloshed over turret, periscope and viewer. Dimouts popped on. Olpe traffic jammed: a jeep had crashed: a truck had stalled: a civilian truck resembled an oiled animal under its flapping tarp.

Memory's belt began in Dennison's brain:

The Gestapo, the man said at breakfast ... the Gestapo ... they did their best to get information from the Maquis ... they were trying to round up the Maquis ... they were ... Fritzes ... that's what the guy at breakfast called them ... said he had fought in North Africa ... said ...

... Okay, send us back to Olpe; at least there is something to eat there ... what was that radio message?

... Slow, slow, now pass, shift into second, watch that fool, he doesn't know how to drive ... funny, Zinc squatting there, asleep maybe ... Landel looks bad ... too much rain, German rain.

When the tanks reached Morb, at 9 kilometers, military cops, outside a battered school, flagged them past an artillery battery: 88's, 102's and 4.2 mortars

were snorting over. General Jake Marlin had his trailer in the field–a zigzag gash in its gleaming aluminum side, his flag soggy.

Why had they been directed to Morb?

Obviously, there were no Nazis here.

Low-flying bombers were passing.

The radio was sputtering misinformation.

On a side street the crews had a chance to oil and gas up, time to urinate, time to drink, time for a chew of gum, time to smoke and talk.

Dennison wandered into a wrecked cottage: plaster crunched underfoot; he straightened a picture on the wall; he listened to the punch of shells; fragments fell from the ceiling as percussions went on. A door opened.

That was a school, had been a school:

Today we'll confine our lessen to Siberia. Do any of you know anything special about Siberia? Can you give us an idea of its size? How about you, Hermann?

What good was it, sending kids to school? They have been attending school since the Romans, or was it before the Romans? Have schools stopped war? Nobody through all those centuries has had a peace class. He grinned, as he leaned against the battered doorframe of the little cottage.

Again he listened to the constant shellfire.

Tanks into action, somebody signalled.

Action!

"Get going!"

"Okay."

"Okay."

Dennison turned over the driving controls to PM and PM smirked his pleasure like a kid: he settled into the driving seat, checked the controls, thinking fast, confident. Landel gave him a wigwag. Then 248 hunched forward, the tracks working evenly; the motor revved smoothly.

Dennison punched PM, and they swung left.

A latch of his mind was fastened to the periscope.

Starboard sank into a pothole; they floundered through other potholes, now following the side of a small river, other tanks in front. Smoke gnarled the sky. They were in a section of Morb, streets, houses. Port side a shell exploded. Something clanged against 248, clanged like a bell. The bus rocked, and Dennison stared anxiously at PM. PM grunted.

The tanks moved through smoke walls down a street: as if propelled through a tube, through a tunnel, Nazis rushed toward 248. They bunched. They fell. Some retreated down a cul-de-sac. Scrambling across barbed wire and fencing, PM followed.

Realizing that the men were trapped, Dennison fired slowly: he tried to account for each man, firing PM's gun: he shouted and fired, shouted and fired: this was the same, knocking out wooden ducks at the fair.

Three down, four to go.

So, the tank was an improvement on the Trojan horse!

Smoke closed in.

Frames flitted by, image after image, scenes without continuity, a sciamachy of trees, people, Greeks, Russians, a cloud, a room, Jeannette, children's face, a cactus in a steamy conservatory, a swan, a wounded boy. On the walls of a latrine he read: THE LAST SEVEN WORDS.

PM was circling, circling.

A shell shook 248.

Dennison ducked to avoid the concussion: he rapped his shoulder on the gun butt: he was angry and fired blindly, and wet his lips with his tongue.

Men were escaping, dozens of them.

Dennison fired in rage, fired at the windows of an apartment: he riddled a closed door: he chipped off stucco: he fired into a pine tree: his shooting jag was warming his belly. 248 swung around a corner.

"Watch out for that concrete slab!" Dennison warned.

PM did not hear.

One of the tracks grazed it.

Dennison signalled again.

His eyes were watering from the heat and smoke.

PM was hit by bullet splash and stopped the tank: fumes and heat almost overwhelmed the crew as they worked over him, Zinc swabbing. Dennison was remembering Al, remembering....

PM waved them off: No, I'm not down for a count of ten! No, let me get back at the controls!

"Where?" he asked Landel.

"How much gas have we?"

"Quarter."

Landel briefed his map, fingers uncertain, eyes uncertain, wanting to stall, to call a halt.

The radio had conked.

Turn back he scribbled.

Back?

Where?

Near the guns, near the trailer, by the school ... men had camouflaged Jake Marlin's trailer with a huge camouflage net ... Dennison and Zinc found a patch of grass in front of the school and settled down, cross-legged, like Ojibways, the

grass uncut and weedy.

Zinc chewed a grass blade.

”PM does all right,” he said.

”Huh?”

”PM does all right.”

”He’s good,” said Dennison.

”He’s gone to see a medic.”

”Scratch ... not bad.”

”Good.”

”Good.”

”Tired,” Zinc admitted, unlacing his shoes to ease his feet, cigarette creasing his mouth: he was no longer in Morb but was tacking along Lake Erie, on his boat, Millie snuggled down among cushions.

Dennison felt that hate was moving closer, was controlling his hands and arms: grubbing his jackknife out of his pocket he scraped grease from his nails, from his fingers: who was that freckled guy, with dirty beard, sunken eyes? Was that Landel, over there jawing with men? Why hadn’t he been killed?

He tossed the butt of his cigarette away, lay back on the grass, fell asleep. Unopposed, they stormed along a narrow street: men with a flame thrower had gutted a tank: 248’s guns destroyed the thrower in a giant swoosh of flames: on the margin of his mind, beyond the roar, he saw a wire of light, filament: his mind shut around it: he lost track of time: he clamped his jaws.

North.

That was Landel’s scribble.

Leaning forward a little, Dennison wet his lips with his tongue.

* * *

4

The train was slowing down.

Orville considered the green countryside and then, as the train crept along, the streets and houses of Ermenonville, appreciating the simplicity of the village,

a few blocks square, scaled to the past, a park, a lake, a swan or two, a rambling château, and rain-wet cobbles.

Rain streaked the train windows ... rain, so, let it rain ... rain has meaning here. It's home again, home, if there is such a place. He was seeing the familiar, outwardly unchanged by war: seeing the old brick/wood house, the mangy Chateaubriand books in the attic, Dad's poilu hat, the grand piano: certain hours would come alive in certain rooms.

It was after two p.m. and the train was late ... wasn't that Jean standing there by the depot, a bunch of farmers around her?

A grey freight car on the siding cut him off, car by car, from the station. The locomotive whistle cemented rain drops together: his face close to the window he waited, counting the passing freight cars, aware too of his compartment: it seemed to rise up around him, threaten: the shabby seat, the shabby suitcase on the shabby carpeting: everything attained a linear dimension: for seconds more, as the engine braked and the cars ground to a stop, he reviewed his trip across Germany, the dangerous jeep ride to Offenburg, a strafing of the German train, the endless check-points, ID problems, the mockingly tedious truck trip into Paris. How could there be so many, many fields and police and hedges strung together? So many, many stops at villages, on sidings?

Opening his compartment door, he glared at the platform people, dozens of rain-splattered faces, those blank faces, beseeching faces. Jeannette was standing under the depot eaves, near the entry door, wearing her uniform, bareheaded, a cape about her shoulders.

He waved and hollered.

Stepping down, a *gendarme* bumped him, and then her arms were around him, her face against his.

"Orville ... Orv, oh, darling!"

Claude was there to shake hands in his old way, something brotherly. He was ready to carry the suitcase.

She squeezed Orville hard, breathing hard, her face upturned, smiling. Thinking of his filthy mufti, he wanted to break away from her: her cleanliness was difficult to accept: he thought her uniform's immaculateness might make him dangerously conspicuous. No one noticed. Everyone was busy coming and going.

He asked about Lena.

Jeannette shook her head.

"No tears," he said.

At that she gave him a special smile: her girlishness struck him, made him shiver, made him wonder how long it could last. To hide his consternation he said:

”Are you coming along with me?”

”Of course I am.”

”Our car’s parked at the rear of the depot,” Claude said. ”How are you?” The question came with a genuine sense of concern.

Orville simply nodded.

The bearded face seemed unchanged.

Sitting in the car, Jeannette kissed Orville consolingly, understanding his fatigue, ruling out his greasy mechanic’s uniform, his unshaven face, peasant cap: as they drove the short distance to the Ronde’s, he said very little, but he did admit it had been ”a rotten trip ... I tried phoning you from Paris, but I couldn’t get through” ... it was easier to sit and stare at the village, at things he knew; Jean guessed the state of his mind.

He asked about Lena again.

”She’s very ill.”

”Is she in the hospital?”

”She’s at home–there’s no room at the hospital.”

”What really happened to her? The radiograms didn’t help me much.”

”Overwork ... no, not that ... she took crazy chances ... on a parachute drop she ... well, it was exposure ... those Maquis ventures ... then she contracted pneumonia.”

Orville realized from her jerky phrases that she was disturbed.

”Aunt Therèse ... how’s she?”

”Not so well.”

”Her telegram said...”

”You’re safe ... you’re here ... a few days ... we have you for a few days ... you and I.” She kissed his hand. ”There will be time for you ... to rest. Let’s be glad we have each other.”

He held her against him.

Rain and windshield wipers and thoughts mixed.

Going to Lena’s room, glad of the family house, he felt dirtier than ever, perhaps he could have changed, somehow, somewhere: it was Claude who urged him to see Lena at once–no, don’t wait to change. Orville respected Colonel Ronde for manipulating this brief leave: would he be arriving in E soon? Walking through the living room, Orville was comforted by the rose grey of the carpet, the oval mirror, the bust of Chopin, the piano. Ascending the staircase he heard the downpour hit the roof.

Home ... yes ...

A priest confronted him at Lena’s door and shook hands, saying nothing. Orville went in: her room smelled of medicines; her oxygen tank reared up alongside her bed; its red plastic handle grinned; her plasma bottle hung on

its chromium hook–and nodded.

Lena's face was deep in the pillow.

"She's dead," the priest said in an unemotional voice. "She died about a half hour ago ... she was unconscious, then the end."

Then the end, Orville repeated to himself.

If my train had been on time? he asked himself.

He stared at the priest accusingly, rudely: had he done anything to help Lena? His fat bearded face was noncommittal. The man's eyes were as dead Lena's: such apathy.

Orville stepped back, stepped aside in disgust.

He was amazed at the beauty of Lena's yellow hair, flung about the pillow, amazed too by the athletic face, her open mouth suggestive of pain. He opened his mouth and shut it again and wet his lips with his tongue, blaming the war for her death. She had a lace handkerchief clenched in her hand ... maybe Amélie had died that way ... maybe Lena had been watching the rain trickle down her bedroom window. Her face was harsh: shadows added to the harshness. Hand on her bedpost, Orville wished he had slept with her: how could it have mattered?

Jeannette had come down the stairs as he descended. Hand sliding down the railing, he saw Lena as a kid, no, the two of them, screaming down the steps, to get outdoors, to play ball. He found Jean in the living room: he did not wish to talk: he wanted to feel that Lena was still alive: as he sat down and faced Jeannette she thought how it must be coming home to death, death in his home, death after the deaths of war: coming home was perplexing at best. Slipping her fingers into his, she tugged at him as they sat together on the sofa.

Claude was standing nearby.

"She's dead," Orville said to him.

Bichain heard Orville. The old man stiffened, and rubbed his beard: he became unaware of Jean and Orville: with bowed head he walked off, seeing the girl he had helped to raise, a woman of tantrums, woman of courage, love and beauty. Mumbling a little, he went to his own room, shut the door, and lay down, an arm flung across his eyes.

"Where's Aunt Therèse?" Orville asked Jean.

"I don't know," she said.

They continued to sit there saying nothing, one lamp lit, no fires burning in the fireplaces, the room quite cold, the wind fumbling at the French doors. Slowly, as they sat together, he became aware of his stench: nobody wanted him: he had nothing for anyone: he clenched his stained hands, eyes toward the floor: this was no way to be, sitting beside her.

"They should have been able to save her," he said.

"They tried ... they tried."

”Who?”

”The doctors, several doctors were in and out. Yes, Orv, they tried.”

”What were they, hacks?”

”Our best.”

”Did they use antibiotics?”

”Yes … injections … they tried … you saw the oxygen tank … I came over often … I know what went on in that room.”

Orville covered his face with his hand and hid from Jeannette.

Jean bit her lips: death on the battlefield, death at home: these things were driving him farther and farther inside himself: they were taking him farther away. Unable to think of anything more to say about Lena, she thought of her own problems at the hospital, daily chores, the endless rounds–patients who required special care.

”Get Bichain to start a fire in the fireplaces,” he said after a while. ”I have to wash … have to change … must go now.”

As he got up, he saw his aunt approaching him slowly, her heels tapping the parquet and then soundless on the carpet.

There was new puffiness about her face and she seemed to have lost weight; had neglected to re-dye her hair and grey and white strands hung about her ears and over her forehead. Wearing a blue ensemble, she carried a black overcoat and an umbrella–carrying it by its metallic ring.

”Orville,” she said, and kissed him. ”Have you just come? Oh, to have you here? I found a driver to bring Dr. Raoul to see Lena; he's gone upstairs to examine her. Just let me sit down for a minute … Jean, dear, how is Lena? Were you upstairs?”

Jeannette was afraid to tell her of Lena's death: she waited beside Mme. Ronde's chair, glancing at her, glancing at Orville.

”I need a cigarette … I'll have one before I see her,” Mme. Ronde said. ”Bring me one, from the box on the table over there by you–like a good boy … Orville, have you seen Lena?” She was speaking unevenly, scolding herself for being lukewarm.

Orville reasoned: she'll soon know: it doesn't matter whether I let her go upstairs: maybe it will be easier to find out from the priest.

Jeannette drew a chair close to Mme. Ronde's chair, leaning toward her, she said: ”We went upstairs to see her … she's dead … she died before we returned from the depot.”

For an instant Mme. Ronde doubted Jean; she folded and unfolded her hands, asking herself why she would lie?

”I must go upstairs … I'll see … I…”

She got up, sat down, folded her raincoat across the back of her chair, and

with slow motion movement got up again.

”I’ll go upstairs...”

It was Christmas and Lena was racing down the stairs, waving a candy cane, shouting ”*Joyeux nöel, joyeux nöel*!”

Standing motionless Mme. Ronde wept softly, handkerchief to her face, hating the thought of finding her dead, wanting to hope.

Jeannette glanced at Orville who was watching his aunt. She put her arm around Mme. Ronde’s waist but she was not willing to accept assistance.

”No ... no...”

Facing Orville, she asked:

”Why did she have to die while I was away?”

”The priest was with her.”

”The priest was with her!” she scoffed. ”Who wants to die alone with a strange priest?”

She sat down.

Did the priest communicate with her: did she speak to him: was there consolation? He was in the room–to prevent people from talking: Bichain had called him in. Precepts: what had they done, had they stopped the war, had they defied Hitler? ... nothing ... nothing, there’s nothing, no god ... wars ... cuckolds ... war ...

She wiped her face with a handkerchief, a man’s handkerchief, her husband’s, snatched from an overcoat. Mopping her face reddened it: it was more tragic, the red and the putty surface wrinkling, the eyes sinking in on themselves.

Her face shocked Jeannette as they waited, motionless. For Orville there was the distorted tie-in with Rousseau’s world.

”Orville, help me, take my arm ... I’m going upstairs, best to go, not wait...”

She said nothing as they climbed the steps; Orville wanted to say a few words; he tried to re-see something he and Lena had done, so he could mention it to his aunt; it was almost as if he had never known Lena. Instead of visualizing or evoking her he recalled his last military involvement, the stress of the trip to visit Ermenonville; as they reached the top step, Orville said:

”I heard from Mother, a while ago.”

”Ah,” his aunt responded.

”She’s all right,” he said.

Words were automatic–out of the past.

Mme. Ronde wondered what it was Orville had said.

Lena’s door was open: the doctor was talking to the young priest whose cropped head seemed more skull than anything alive. Mme. Ronde found her way to Lena’s bed ... Orville found his way downstairs, rejoining Jeannette, saying over and over, I must go, I must remember to take a bath and scrub ... I must

say … I must tell Jean … I must … must say …

She kissed him and said quietly:

”I’m going to the hospital.”

”Yes?”

”I’m on duty, worried about a fellow there. Meet me early at the hospital, in the entry, say about eight o’clock? … Okay? but if things don’t work out call me … no, no, you can’t, the phone’s out of order.”

”The hospital … at eight? I’ll be there … now, I have to take … but how are you getting back? Let Claude drive you there.”

”I have my raincoat and umbrella. It’s not far, you know.”

”Not in this rain!”

”Then I’ll ask Claude.”

He helped her into her raincoat; Claude came; at the door her red head disappeared under his black umbrella; then Orville let the window drapes fall into place.

Have to go upstairs … rest … sit on my bed … take off these clothes … rest …

In his room he closed the door, sensing that the latch slid into place.

He was alone!!

Sitting on his bed he noticed the guns in their oak rack, the tackle, the reel, the bass above his bed; he thought he had seen them for the last time. Dragging off his shoes, he attempted to figure out what day it was: Wednesday? Friday? It didn’t matter.

His socks on the floor, he thought of stretching out as he was: his head was mumbling about fishing gear: his eyes returned to the poles: beads of light twinkled on ferrules and reels. The transparent cover had fallen off one of the reels.

In the bathroom he kicked his clothes into a corner and listened to the water rushing into the tub, amazed by the jet: water, ordinary, hot water, wonderful water, swishing water. He tossed a washcloth over the side of the tub and watched it float before it became waterlogged. So, the heater was okay.

In the clear warmth he found rest: marvelous: marvelous to lie there: and the cake of soap, spinning! He had planned to scrub his hair and then dress but he knew he had to sleep: with the hot washcloth over his face he breathed deeply: he sopped it over his eyelids: reluctantly, he climbed out and half dried himself, stopping to finger the colorful towel, hold it out, count the blue and white stripes.

From his bed he turned out the lamp, and let himself go: it was like that, just couldn’t be helped: a sort of a toboggan: the room stopped existing, the sheets gathered about his belly, legs, and shoulders: they felt warm: then, there was silence, and then–though he wasn’t sure–someone was knocking, knocking

insistently on the door, someone was speaking:

Lena? Claude? Jean?

" ... Supper's on the table ... It's getting late. Are you coming down? Jeannette's come back from the hospital..."

"Ah ... ah, I'm coming, let me get dressed ... I, yes ... let me get dressed."

He had not eaten in Paris: of course there was nothing available on the train; he swung his feet to the floor: yes, he was hungry: he listened: it was still raining: he heard the rain-quiet on the big house. In another moment, he laid clothes on his bed, old clothes from the wardrobe, and heard that other sound, the quietude of death.

Everyone's.

Switching on a second lamp, one on his chest-of-drawers, he fiddled with things in the top drawer. He unrolled a belt for his slacks. There was a tie that Uncle Victor had given him. The cufflinks were from his mother. He could still wear the old, brown alligator shoes: they went on comfortably. The sweater had been a favorite: he shook it out, slipped it on slowly, buttoned it, felt in the pockets.

When he came downstairs, Jean was in the dining room, arranging roses on the dining table, white roses in a crystal bowl, full blown roses, their petals shattering as she arranged them.

"Hi, Orville. Aren't you hungry? Did you get some sleep?"

He hugged her.

"Sure ... sure!" He exclaimed and kissed her, her face magical, the fragrance of roses also there: when had she appeared more beautiful!

"You look rested," she said.

"But I haven't shaved." He scrubbed a hand over his beard. "These old clothes of mine ... sure great to have them..."

"Sit down, my dear."

She had put on a blue serge, lace at the throat, the lace in a broad, open pattern of fully open poppies, very provincial, the ensemble nineteenth century.

"Is Aunt Therèse having supper?"

"It's late ... she's gone to bed ... she didn't want any supper."

"Has she sent for Uncle Victor?"

"I don't know. I hope he can come ... she needs him. I hope I can help her ... I want to do all I can."

Somehow her calm came as a surprise: or was it simplicity and her concern that surprised! He sat at the table, thinking of the new way she combed her hair, curling it on her neck and over her ears and temples. Tiny costume jewels clipped each ear.

"How has it been at the hospital?"

She sat across from him, saying:

”We work in shifts ... I'm in on some of the surgical cases ... they come in fast ... POW's ... civilians ... officers ... it's the Nazis we resent...”

All the magic had gone from her face; her sentences were staccato; she leaned on the table, apprehensive–troubled by gigantism of the war: thoughts of Lena confused her: she wished to reach a clearer understanding of Orville and his future.

Annette served, greeting Orville in a hushed voice: obviously, she had been crying: her face seemed a gnome's face from some cathedral altar or reredos. Nervous, she acted more like a newcomer than one who had been with the Ronde household for years.

As he ate, Orville felt out of place: the familiar napkins, fork, knife, plates and goblets became unfamiliar: so were Jean in her serge and the surrounding silence: his mind screwed about, circled, picked at itself, fled somewhere, wanting assurances.

”Was it bad out there, bad most of the time?” she wanted to know, troubled by the silence and his grim expression, hoping to break through.

He was afraid to remain silent, afraid to reply: the immediate world seemed to be beyond the windows, kept there by a mere sheet of glass: the past was unreal, thin, another sheet of glass: the wrong word might shatter both: and yet he talked, talked about the Corps, and as he talked he attempted to conceal his hate and his killings.

”Tell me more about yourself,” he urged her.

She shook her head.

It should not be this way, he told himself.

He thought of her hands, how they hovered over her coffee cup and silver, fragile fingers–not for any Corps. They were meant to help, help the wounded, help children. His own fingers–he glared at them, seeing the grime under the nails. They could not help. Concealing them under his napkins, he shoved them between his legs: tomorrow I have to clean out the grease. Shave. Wash my hair.

”They have such good things to eat here, at the Rondes',” Jean said. ”While Lena was ill I was here almost every day.”

Squab ... peas ... soufflé ... chicken ... omelette ... ham ...

”Umm!” he exclaimed.

The rain was moving about.

He stared at Jean's hair–the auburn, the copper.

As she turned her head the colors changed: hers was a dignified head, heavy eyebrows, smooth forehead, thin nose, good head, loving ... her lashes were darker than her eyebrows.

”Don't look at me like that,” she objected earnestly, misunderstanding him.

”I’m sorry,” he said.

”Men glare at me in the hospital,” she said.

”It’s nothing,” he said, frowning, laying down his knife and fork. Have I been staring at her in some crazy way? He forced himself to continue eating; he had not eaten much but he was ready to leave the table. Again he questioned love, how long did it last? A man’s love for a woman, a woman’s for a man, a child’s love for his parents? Life was not much at cherishing love: it had lost that gift if it ever had that gift for any length of time. Now, for love to endure very long it had to mount a machine gun.

A switch clicked in his brain: a small gate opened: a Sherman tank roared through the opening: a farm was burning.

After dessert and coffee, they sat in the living room where Claude had fires blazing, lamps and candles lit. Lena’s angora, curled on a floor cushion, was fast asleep. Orville stroked him and he rolled over and yawned and stretched: upstairs a door slammed. The mantel clock chimed delicately: rain was making slow sounds.

Orville sat close to Jeannette on the sofa and the warmth of her body, the warmth of her hands and the fires made him shut his eyes: nothing was wrong; then she asked her disturbing question, that old question, as though in great pain.

”Why do we have to die?”

She was remembering remembrances of London and Wisconsin, remembering her father who had often said that death was not enough.

”... Hardly a question ... doesn’t it evolve out of the medieval ages, Jean? I guess they were asking that during the Crusades. During the Inquisition. Sir Walter must have asked it. Joan. Maybe Christ?

”An important question ... but for some of us there’s an answer: we die to escape hell. I’ve been wanting to escape it. Our inquisition ... can’t we call it that? ... it’s not something we cherish ... death is a way out. You know that...”

”I shouldn’t have asked ... I know better ... sometimes it seems there ought to be a way to live without tragedy ... I want to make life worthwhile for you, Orv. Back home. Together. I want it to be like that.”

He smiled a smile of thanks and love.

”I still think about Rousseau because I was brought up thinking about him. Ermenonville’s his shadow ... I grew up in that shadow. You want to make life worthwhile for us ... he wanted to make life worthwhile for the world. He was a brave guy–a fighter. You know ... he said civilization is a disease. As the war hounds us, we see he was right. He was a man of reveries ... I’ve wanted to be a man of reveries.”

It seemed to Orville that Rousseau’s philosophy was symbolized by the white tomb on the island of poplars, by the swans on the Petit Lac. Men paid

their respect by pausing there, confronting the empty tomb.

Jean snuggled closer to Orv.

”Rousseau says we’re slaves to our laws and thinks we can free ourselves by respecting nature, making life simpler. Mom and I thought that too; that’s why we moved to the States ... we thought we wouldn’t have to kowtow to state or church or...”

Orville tasted his own slavery as he talked.

”Men still want to get rid of Rousseau ... too dangerous ... when you read his *Confessions* you see how he feels ... Me ... I like his *Reveries* ... maybe because he finished them in Ermenonville...”

Lapsing into silence they listened to the house and rain sounds.

Having read Rousseau’s first chapters recently, she thumbed through thoughts as they listened together. Firelight washed the ceiling, polished the side of the grand piano. Someone was going up the staircase–thoughtful steps. Servant voices sounded, then faded. A log sent up brilliant sparks and then flared into saw teeth of orange and red.

The cat rubbed against Orville’s leg.

”I started out living pretty sanely ... at Cornell ... then I fell into the war trap...”

”It will end, Orville dear. We’ll be free soon.”

”I wish I thought that.”

”We must think that.”

”Can luck begin once more? And why should you and I be lucky? Tell me that. Don’t tell me that somebody always is ... a lot of somebodies are not ... I won’t buy that guff.”

Deep in his thinking he was convinced that he would not survive: the conviction slapped him across the face: there it was, in the wood and sparks and smoke. Getting up abruptly, he lit a cigarette, offering Jean one.

Now he knew why the Chopin bust expressed mystery: its mystery was death, death for those who have any kindness in them. Poor Chopin, so long an exile, always dying, starved for love, always composing ... Part of an étude rattled through Orville as he walked the floor: his mother was sitting at the piano there, playing. He squinted at the marble and the hooded eyes squinted back at him and he walked the length of the room.

Jean sat with her chin on her hand, wanting to enjoy a movie in Senlis–something sophisticated or humorous. She missed Chuck: he would be glad to take her: they had been ardent movie buffs. She felt that he would not have killed himself if she had been around to care for him, read to him, help him go for walks. She felt she should have remained in the States ... then, again, she saw the injured in Europe.

Of course Orville and I could attend a movie in Senlis, away from death. Tomorrow? Tomorrow they will carry Lena out of this house.

As Claude drove Jean to the hospital, he told her what Lena had meant to him, saying it well, saying tomorrow will be a rough day.

In the morning he and Orville carried Lena down the staircase to a pickup truck: the undertaker, a sickly man of fifty, with a grey beard, braided straw hat, and shabby clothes, was apologetic:

"... Pardon, Monsieur, the hearse wouldn't start ... I think, a little later, for the funeral, I can get it started, yes ... I had to borrow this truck. So little gas ... I wasn't sure I could come..."

As Orville covered Lena on the truck floor he heard what was being said: he was not interested: drawing aside the blanket he had a final look, a long look, seeing Lena when kindness was kindness, when responsibilities were nil: fun, that was Lena: they felt they were more than cousins: slowly folding the blanket over her he was keenly aware that he was folding it over many things.

In his room he buzzed a reel on one of his Swiss rods: it seemed alive, waiting for a bluebottle fly. He opened his creel, thumped it, unhooked a couple of tempting flies and dropped them into the basket. Raising the lid of his aluminum fly box he grinned:

Jesus ... all those beauties! Peacock quills ... cock's hackle ... crow wing feathers ... spring, summer, and autumn Nonettes ...

Strewing flies on his bed he checked them one by one: no rust: such colors!

With a pair of rods, a hatband of flies and his creel, he stole down the rear stair and out of the house: there was not much wind ... it was cold but not too damn cold for Jean: she would be there, at Rousseau's statue, in the village.

She was to meet him at eleven–a change in time.

Eleven ... eleven-twenty ... eleven-thirty!

Saying good morning to several villagers, he half recognized a few of them.

He eyed bird droppings on the *citoyen's* bronze shoulders: purple droppings, blue ones, yellow ones. What was the name of that opera he had composed? But there, there she was, bustling, a rush basket on her arm, her red hair blowing.

She had gotten out of her hospital uniform and was wearing corduroy and sweater.

"Hi, Orv!"

"Hi, kid! You're late, according to my sundial," he said, smiling, wanting to josh her.

"Oh, our cook was slow fixing our lunch ... he got into some kind of dither. You know how cooks are! ... Just wait till you see what I've got here in the basket!"

They kissed, crooked their arms together, and strolled out of the village, along the Nonette, the sun breaking through onto the stream: they did not walk far: he knew a fishing spot by an old ruin: among the willows were regal chestnut and poplar and pine: brown leaves cluttered the path, most of them soggy; it was as if nobody had walked there since the days of Napoleon.

They cast from grassy embankments, from muddy flats, and from tiny sandy beaches. She was as clever with her casting as he: it was Wisconsin casting upstream versus New York casting downstream: what marvelous, marvelous flies, she exclaimed.

"I didn't know you're a pro at tieing."

Her face in the leafy sunlight was half-shadow.

Sunlight fell on the huge ruined castle as they fished below it, from blocks of masonry, thick, limestone slabs, some of them mossy and intricately carved. Orville's stone–the one he was casting from–bore a hooded falcon with Latin letters chiselled under its claws. They cast into a pool overhung by a three-story chunk of masonry, a dark green pool, free of snags or leaves, pool and castle merging. She dropped a fly inside a water window: with each flick of the fly the window disappeared, to reappear almost immediately. They didn't talk as they fished. A dove talked. A raven settled in a pine, intrigued by the fishermen. Downstream cattle waded, sucking softly, up to their knees in the water.

"Good boy," Jean exclaimed, as he got a strike. "Bring him in easy ... easy does it."

Releasing some line, he played his trout: the reel's spinning thrilled him: the line sliced across the water, forming a ragged oval: he was in New York again.

Jeannette longed to sign out, her job forsaken: she longed to keep him forever.

"Not very big," he said, landing his catch. "A pound or so, I guess." But he was very pleased.

"He's great ... he's great!"

She loved his face.

Plopping his catch into his creel, he said:

"There used to be some big ones in here ... years ago Prince Radziwill stocked the Nonette. I've heard some tall stories."

"I've heard that the Radziwills still take care of Ermenonville," she said, casting again. "I've never met any of the family ... they help the hospital financially."

"They may convert their country house into a hospital," he said.

"I've heard that too."

While they fished the sun ducked behind the castle. Clouds. The kind that seem to be sheared off a sheep appeared along the horizon, above the trees; they

seemed headed for the Nonette and E.

As Jean hopped from one block of masonry to another, she slipped into the stream, soaking herself to the knees: for a while she kidded about it but as the wind increased she complained of the cold.

”I've got to quit,” she said, but at that moment, as she moved toward the embankment for shelter from the wind, she got a strike. Too cold and uncomfortable to play her fish she landed the trout quickly, saying:

”Okay ... okay ... I have to quit ... my sweater's not enough to keep me warm ... let's go to the hospital...”

”Well we've each landed one. That's pretty darn good,” he said.

Her rod against a tree, she fussed with her sweater collar and trousers, appreciating Orville's graceful cast–the dimple of his fly as it settled.

When will he have another chance?

”Stay on, Orville ... meet at the hospital ... go on ... you'll land another one.”

His thoughts, as he played his line, cameraed across time, clicked, stopped: there he was with Lena in her boat on the Nonette: she was trolling, the wind warm, cattails along the banks ...

”I'm coming, Jean ... Just a second.”

As he wound the line, speeding his reel, he watched swallows dip, fly close to the water, rise, ride the wind, turn.

”Let's have our lunch at the hospital,” she suggested, as they walked together. She carried Orville's creel and he carried the lunch basket and poles. The sky's greyness worked lower into surrounding trees and fields. Jean shivered as they followed a willow path: she was glad to hump along briskly.

”Her funeral will be tomorrow,” he said.

”Yes, I know,” she said.

”Will you be able to come?”

”I think so.”

”You and I have seen a lot of death.”

”Yes, we have.”

”Life's not supposed to be like that.”

They detoured to the hospital kitchen. Opening a half-door, placing their basket on a plank table, Jean told the cook what a mess she was in.

”Can we eat here?”

”Change your clothes, then have your picnic here, where it's warm. I'll give you all the hot soup you can eat. You'll be all right in no time, Mlle. Jean.”

He was an obese fellow of seventy or so, his arms swirled with golden hairs, his moustache white like his crop of hair. He thought Jeannette very amusing, her accent reminding him of the French he had heard as a lad in Canada.

While Jean changed, Orville enjoyed soup at the deal table, thinking of

Uncle Victor, Lena, the war: it was possible that Victor would be unable to attend the burial. If he came, what would they say to each other? Casual stuff about the war? A string of dull comments about the U.S.? Something banal about Lena? He was concerned about Aunt Therèse ...

That sadness of hers: those hollow eyes!

Through the half-door, Orville could watch the street: villagers in raincoats, in thick sweaters, some under umbrellas, people and pigeons, rain, wind, Nazis. Suddenly, nurses flooded the kitchen, entering through an inside door, some with trays of dishes. Annoying the cook, they swooped around his stove. Suddenly, they were gone, carrying their trays and chatter into an adjoining room.

Jeannette and Orville ate at the table, the talkative chef hovering about, yarning about old times in E. They ate hungrily and then dropped into a tobacco shop for cigarettes, and Orville bought a copy of *Le Senlis*.

The proprietor was opinionated about the drab future of France: he ranted about the Occupation, about local corruption, a big man with a big mouth. Orville lit a cigarette and slammed the door on him−the fellow still griping. Jean rolled the newspaper and tucked it under her arm. Orville held the umbrella. Wind and rain took over as they walked toward the hospital.

... The sneers of life: so you had a cousin but didn't dare sleep with her because of your puritanism ... emergency leave ... emergency thoughts ... you ... you went fishing and gave your catch to the cook ... you have a girl named Jean ... you bought a newspaper ...

Was that Victor's car up ahead?

Is that our military hero, our 1918 professional?

Claude is shutting the car doors.

Well, here we are at the hospital, shall we go in out of the rain?

It was almost fishing in the rain, when fish really bite. A fishing funeral: is that on tomorrow's agenda? Yes, tomorrow she is to be buried ... Yes, a cup of coffee, Claude ... Yes, miserable weather. Yes, Jean's returned: she's on duty.

Orville and Victor sat in the living room: Orville's fishing rods were leaning against a wall.

"So, you went fishing in the rain?"

"No, Uncle Victor ... it wasn't raining..."

"Any luck? ... I used to have good luck."

"I caught one."

"Ah!"

Flipping open a cigar box, Victor offered cigars.

During seven years the man had become another man: his silky white hair was brushed over a bald spot; his moustache had become a gentle weed; there

was no color in his cheeks; his chin was porcelain white: what had happened to his eyes? And his voice? Words came painfully.

A long rectangular coffee table stood between them: on it lay several current magazines and paperbacks. Colonel Ronde called Bichain and asked for coffee and a fire in one of the fireplaces.

”Turn on some lamps, Claude.”

”It's been years, many years, since we've talked ... did we talk very much when you were here ... ah, these wars!” His eyelids lifted and the pupils bored into Orville. ”You resemble your dad ... a man I always liked ... it seems only yesterday he was here.” He tugged at a lapel of his blue serge and then screwed a finger in his ear.

”Bob believed that there never would be another war, he felt that nations couldn't afford one ... he was thinking of money, the waste of money ... he was clever with money ... he would not have been able to understand the billions poured into this crusade.” Ronde cracked the band of his cigar, letting it drop onto the rug.

He described his Marseilles-Paris freight services: he was the line's supervisor (five years): he sketched in his military duties, carried out on the side:

”You know I was flown here in a biplane ... to a deserted farm. Active ... ah, active duty, you see.”

The problems of the protracted German occupation worried him: problems that involved the desperate underground. He said that Lena had been with the Maquis ...

All bravery and foolhardiness ...

”I've tried to keep away from the Maquis for the sake of my family and business. I'm afraid of reprisals in Marseille and here in little Ermenonville, after the war. Lena was often entrusted with important documents ... I suspect that the Maquis were using her ... I think you get what I infer.”

”She had never opened up with me,” Orville said.

”I reject her kind of game. It always gets sticky. Your friends become suspect; your peace of mind is shattered ... it's, umm, ah, bad.” He smoked thoughtfully. ”War is preferable to that kind of deceit. I don't want to blackmail my brain...”

For Orville the relationship was becoming meaningful; he wanted to continue talking, and as they talked he began to confide:

” ... You understand how our draft works ... you see, I was drafted ... I tried to make myself believe in personal sacrifice ... sure, sure, we would accomplish great things–world progress. I hardly knew what Nazism was. Okay. Invasion. Rescue Europe. To hell with Rommel. Ike and de Gaulle! I thought of you and Lena and Aunt Therèse ... my Ermenonville. I knew that France was having it

rough ...

”At Cornell I got the architecture bug ... sure, a job ... a life doing churches, houses, barns, silos. That was my idea of freedom. If you ask me what freedom is I don’t know anymore. Right now ... now I’m shackled ... this killing business has me!”

Orville attempted to analyze his uncle’s face: was he betraying himself, hurting Ronde?

Bombers roared over the house, but when it was quiet he continued:

”I have visited Dad’s grave. I’ve been re-thinking ... why is he dead and why am I living?”

The colonel shook his head, and puffed his cigar.

”You’ve something to live for,” he said. ”You have your Jean. It’s a matter of weeks, Orville, because Nazi Germany is collapsing ... only a matter of weeks. You must manage to stay alive. Look, you are fighting criminals, not soldiers. There’s a prison named Auschwitz where the Nazis are murdering thousands of Jews, innocents, women, kids. German factories employ slave labor...”

The clock on the mantel chimed three: Claude was laying a fire in a fireplace and glanced at the clock and then at the men: he had placed liqueurs on the table but they were unaware.

Momentarily, Ronde thought of Lena and Orville playing together as kids: they had meant much to each other: their relationship had pleased almost everyone who knew them: when he radio-phoned General Meade to grant a leave to Orville it was this relationship Ronde was remembering. Meade had met both Lena and Orville when a guest at Ermenonville, in ’38.

”Jeannette wants to marry,” Orville went on. ”I’m not sure how, on faith ... my Jean. Can I tell you that there are no real compensations? It’s illusion, self-delusion, or nothing!”

Aunt Therèse came in and embraced them: pale, very sad, she took a rocker beside her husband, a shawl about her shoulders.

”I’m glad you’ve found each other,” she said with childish abruptness. It was comforting to her to have the men together, it eased her loss for the moment; it brought to mind a summer six years ago when there had been a family reunion for her birthday, people from Marseilles, Paris, St. Cloud, Senlis. She saw in Victor’s face that reunion: why, they were growing old in Ermenonville!

”It wasn’t so long ago that I was religious, I was a girl who secreted her crucifix under her pillow, who loved her rosary. It wasn’t fear or superstition. I thought of Christ as my friend: I counted on him ...

”You men count on guns. God’s never been real to you; we all know that those who go to war are disregarding thou shall not. I had Christ as my friend in those days...”

Claude had left the room. They were silent. The logs were crackling.

"Lena turned her back on Christ," she added. "There was no god to help her through bad times. She felt that there is no eternal life. The war was her life."

"Youth ... the hunger of youth," said Victor, as though talking to himself. "Her country, the struggle for world freedom ... wasn't it something like that?"

"Perhaps so ... but I know that each of us is poorer for losing faith ... and losing her ... our Lena." She rocked in her rocker, hands clenched on the arms of the chair.

Next morning they sat together in the village church, skinny blue glass windows on each side of the room, the altar small and primitively carved, its gold leaf badly scaled. An 18th century reliquary of gilt wood–a miniature of gem-like quality–adorned a side table. Its scarf was tattered, many of the metallic threads tarnished and broken, their story the story of the crucifixion.

Orville sat between his aunt and uncle, Jeannette beside Victor: he noticed Annette, Claude, Celeste, Thomassont, neighbors, strangers: was one of them Charles Chabrun, her lover from Paris? Had Claude informed him of Lena's death? As everyone knelt on the kneeling pads Orville looked at Jeannette, considering things she had said indicative of her faith: it seemed to be a nurse's faith, if there was such a faith.

Candles burned on the altar and alongside Lena's coffin; somebody was playing a Bach chorale on the organ: the room was cold: icy cold: chill seeped from the tiled floor and from behind the organ where there seemed to be a smashed window or open door.

How kind to fuss over the dead like this; it meant so much more than death on the battlefield.

As Orville knelt, he started a letter to his mother in the back of his mind, writing it in French, the language she loved most:

Dear Mom:

When I arrived in E I found that Lena was dead of pneumonia. I know you will be saddened by this news. You two got along so well together. It is rough these days, but you already know this. I am glad that you are not in Europe. Your Europe exists no longer.

I know I have not written to you for a long time. I simply can not write. There is nothing new to tell you. Our Corps is engaged in battle after battle; you would not want me to recount that kind of stuff. The war, as I see it, seems far from ending: resistance is bitter and strong. I am told that the war may end shortly. I don't believe it ...

Orville glanced about the church, at the windows, at the ceiling, at the grains in the pew in front of him, syrup-colored grains.

Mom ... our enemy is collective insanity. It is everyone's enemy. I feel

it, here in Ermenonville (even in church) ... I feel impelled to revolt against all things. I hate myself for I am to blame for many of the things that have happened to me, tragic things.

In Africa, as we fought against Rommel's tank corps, we had hopes of one kind and another. Those hopes have vanished one by one ... some of us are at the bottom rung.

If I get home I will not attend church with you, or go with anyone: my brain won't stomach it: if I fail to grasp theological preachment it is due to man's insensate cruelty and nothing I can see ahead cancels those experiences. My Jesus has been a trigger Jesus. My chapter and verse have been pain and explosives.

I am an old guy from Ithaca: "giver of pain."

Orville realized that his aunt was sobbing but he could not put his hand on hers. She must endure alone.

Alone.

Here I am alone, with no brother or neighbor, or friend or society but myself: isn't that the gist of the first part of Rousseau's *Reveries*!

My personal discoveries would startle you because they are un-French, un-American. They are discoveries that must have been made a hundred or five hundred thousand years ago: survival!

Yesterday, Jeannette and I fished in the Nonette, each of us catching one. We fished by the old castle–a cold, cold day. I remember your portfolio of watercolors of the ruin–charming scenes. I never could do as well. Are you still sketching, Mom? There are so many pleasant places around Ithaca.

The funeral service was almost over.

Are you still dating Chris Wilson? He is a nice guy. How's his medical practice doing? Improving? Is he getting rich?

I guess things are about as usual in Ithaca–minus the fellows who are off to war. I suppose you attend plays at Willard Straight. Have you seen some good ones? I hope so. And your French classes–how is teaching these days?

Jean is okay–Aunt and Uncle okay, though very depressed. Lena's death will take a hell of a lot out of them.

Keep well ...

Orville felt his aunt's hand on his own; confused he glanced around.

Her face expressed a kind of final somberness.

The priest's face was professionally blank.

Orville did not want to see Victor's face, or Jeannette's.

In the cemetery he was impressed once more by life's clever deceptions: he had never really known Lena-the-Maquise; he did not know Therèse or Victor, he did not know Jeannette: in a nearby plot lay someone else he had never known–Robert St. Denis.

Orville's thoughts reached out to what was taking place.

They were lowering Lena's coffin–ropes going down: a couple of grave men were watching the pair who were doing the job; one of the watchers lit a cigarette as the ropes jerked and the coffin hesitated.

"Walk back with me," Jeannette said.

"Yes," he said.

"Let's go ... now ... take my arm."

"Yes."

They walked arm in arm, the cemetery road straight, narrow, an uncut weed strip down the middle, its double row of pines beaded with rain, needles sagging, a sparrow chattering in a small tree.

She wanted to restore their relationship: wanted to help him: what was his mood?

"Are you warm?" she asked.

"Yes ... no ... I'm cold ... the church was cold ... are you cold?"

"I've got a sweater on underneath my coat. I can't take a chance, and catch a cold."

"We were plenty wacky to try to have a picnic at this season of the year," he admitted.

"They say it snowed in Paris yesterday," she said.

"Really?"

"I'd rather have snow than so much rain."

"Sure."

The empty hearse passed, grinding in low, bobbing and shaking on antique springs, a vintage Mercedes. The driver swung wide for an intersecting road and brushed against branches, scraping the hood and top. A truck, towing a disabled car, crept toward Senlis, tailing fumes.

I'm crazy ... I didn't have to attend her funeral ... death in a fox hole ... death at ten miles an hour ... cremation ... pneumonia ... you have your choice ... step right up, it's death.

Who am I to want to make love? Have a wife! Have more kids to make more killers! More wars! She ought to walk alone, she and her hypodermics and anesthesias and bed pans! We ought to drink an aperitif, shake hands and call it quits!

"Darling," she said, making an effort.

"What?" he asked bluntly, unable to so much as glance at her.

He hated himself because she was normal, able to communicate, eager to help, able to see ahead.

"You're a dreamer," he exclaimed, resentment increasing.

"I suppose I am. Is that bad?"

”Wouldn’t it be better if you weren’t?”

”What do you mean?”

”Just that.”

”But I try to do my job; I work hard. I don’t understand you.”

”It would be better to let the wounded die. They were damn fools to get themselves wounded in the first place.”

”Orville ... Orville!”

She was troubled and frightened: such a voice.

”I put them to death, and you sew them together ... we call that life.”

”The funeral upset you.”

”Death’s better on the battlefield, without a big, mediocre fuss.”

Then he remembered Al, who had died in his arms, the gaping hole in his skull. He remembered Chuck and his suicide ... He shuddered in his skull. He remembered Maitland ... his jaw clamped.

”I’ll shut up,” he said. ”I’ll be okay soon ... just let me shut up ... just let me be.”

The outdoors and the sky and her silent companionship helped but he could not talk, would not talk: impotence–he knew the meaning and the implications. Yanking off a splinter of wood at the hospital gate, he said:

”I’ll phone you ... I’ll see you.”

And he walked away.

Jeannette welcomed the solitude of her small room and the tangled, dying vines over the lace-curtained windows: curtains, a single chair, a night table, and her bed. She gave way to tears, bewildered by Orville, saddened by the funeral, resenting the hospital and its wounded, resenting Dr. Mercier, Dr. Marcuse, Louis ... what a lackluster lot of minor medics: they would never mean anything to her: each day was impersonal: I must get to a movie in Senlis, perhaps a luncheon date: the men craved sex (she did not blame them, so often wanting it herself). She was able to concentrate on duty and remain faithful to Orville and sexual fantasies.

On Ermenonville’s main street, war had slung together a shabby eating place, between a candy shop and a milliner’s. Walking through the village, Orville opened the door onto charcoal smoke and a row of empty tables spread with checkered cloths. A fellow, wearing an apron, appeared from behind an unpainted wooden screen and asked Orville what he wanted, speaking rudely, obviously ill, his voice strained, the face fat, both obese and pocked: something was hurting his lungs: such coughing!

Orville ordered wine and asked for a pack of cigarettes and sat down–arms elbowed on the red and white squares. As he sipped wine he tried to evolve a tomorrow:

Yeah, Germany was on fire. He was due back. He wanted none of it. He wanted time, time to be himself, for a week or a month, doing something useful: it would be exciting to plan a house, and he scrawled the outlines of a residence on the table cover with the handle of a spoon: a plan: when can I have a chance to plan?

For now, he had had enough of Jeannette: what help was she? Nobody was gifted at helping: the world was not geared to helping: sleep might help: it was possible to drown in sleep, under illusion and disillusion, head pillowed on hate, saying to hell with khaki, away with GI slop, the stink of another man's piss.

When the waiter tried to talk, Orville shook him off.

"Sorry," he said, and gulped his wine and stalked out.

Over there is where I attended school, that one-story building where famed New York architect learned about King Francis, Napoleon, read Victor Hugo and Villon, hated classes: see bronze tablet above the entry: what numbing sensations in that box-shaped building topped by four chimney pots.

Across the street, by those poplar trees, is her hospital: notice the calloused grey paint: some of the doors have scaled: some of the windows are blacked out. Nurses are huddled on the front porch, wrapped in coats, jackets, sweaters, scarves, relating the latest.

Out in the country I could walk for years, bumping myself against the cage of introversion. Trees are bare. Not a person is working in the fields ... maybe the fields have been deserted for years.

The walls of a bygone abbey were waiting for someone or something, a scream, a leaf. Across hedgeless fields, willows were also waiting. No machine guns.

His shoes scuffed gravel; mud took the place of gravel; he walked with his hands stuffed in his pockets. The one friendly thing was his pocket knife, given by his mother, small, agate-covered knife. Somehow, he had been able to keep it.

Something rustled alongside the road, a field mouse in a heap of leaves. Was that its home?

Home?

Shall I return to the Rondes?

No.

No, Jeannette ... no ...

Keep walking.

Thirsty, hungry ... keep walking. If it rains, keep walking. If you get tired, keep walking.

When it was dark he was still walking. Somewhere in the night he heard a man's voice. He could not identify the speaker at first.

"Is it worthwhile?" the voice asked.

”What?”

”The mess you’re in.”

”No.”

”Does she still play Debussy?”

”Who?”

”Your mother.”

”Now and then.”

”Chopin?”

”Some.”

”Why don’t you go AWOL?”

”Shall I?”

”What’s she doing in Ithaca?”

”Teaching French.”

”And you’re going back to her?”

”To war.”

”I saw you at my grave. Join me! You still have your rifle in your room.”

Did he sound like that? Orville asked himself.

Pausing, standing in the dark road, he saw the Renault cross a field, its turret gun lowered, the treads silent, the motor noiseless ... inside the tank, a blond face, a face with blood smeared on it ... a silent shell exploded.

The Renault slumped behind a hedge.

Smoke rose.

Orville approached an inn and opened the partly open door: the room was friendly, like a rustic pub, with a stone fireplace at the far end and a bar jutting out at an angle, cutting off part of the room. A fire roared and the firelight labelled liquor bottles and a collection of miniatures on a series of shelves. A police dog barked at Orville but a young woman shooed him away with a broom, laughing. She invited Orville to sit down, and at the same moment farmers tramped in and gathered around a table, talking loudly, their shoes and clothes smelling of manure. One of them demanded a deck of cards and began removing his black leather jacket.

An odor of lamb mixed with garlic attacked the smell of manure: Orville was amused as he sat alone, watching. He hoped he might get some country fare and thought of remaining overnight, if they had a room that was clean enough. Clean ... of course it must be clean, he ridiculed himself, remembering the tanks, the war.

The young girl was drying her hands on a towel, as she stood by the farmers. The men stared at Orville, eyes and gestures showing their antagonism. The big fire in the fireplace interested Orville more than the farmers: its bigness was a welcome; the heat too was welcome. He was eyeing the fire when the girl asked

him if he wanted some wine.

"Some wine ... something to eat?"

"What are you serving? Do you have Chablis ... I want something to eat ... wine with my meal."

She thought him well dressed: what's he doing here? Where's he from? No jeep or car.

"We've mutton stew," she muttered.

"What else?"

"Roast beef."

"So ... soup de jour, beef, potatoes, a vegetable."

"Chablis?"

"Yes."

The farmers settled down noisily to their cards and beer; when Orville finished his meal he felt locked in himself; the fire was dying down; the place had lost its welcome; he talked with the girl as she refilled his glass: he could not return home, he talked about E, about farmers he had known: the girl was about twenty, twenty-two, plain, blonde, her hair in a braided loop on top of her head. Two of her front teeth were missing. But she had a neat span around her waist and nice legs: she was a woman to sleep with.

"Pastry?" she asked.

"Later," he said, aware of how soon he would be trapped in the war, a low-flying plane part of that realization.

Later ...

She waited on the farmers; he had pastry and coffee and drowsed by the sleepy fire; presently, with a scraping of shoes and chairs, the farmers left; a lone customer remained. A man who had the appearance of a doctor, ate at a small table, spooning a bowl of soup, the steam fogging his steel-rimmed glasses; the dog lay beside him as if they were old friends.

When Orville stopped at the cash register he counted clumsily, thinking in terms of dollars: he was pleased, as he fumbled with the bills, that Claude had provided him with so much. The waitress noticed his crammed billfold, cupped her chin in one hand, and smiled as if the francs had appreciative eyes.

"Do you have a room?"

"For tonight?"

"Yes, tonight."

"I think so ... just a moment, I'll make sure."

She spoke to someone at the rear, someone in the kitchen, and bounced back, and grinned a soft, calculating grin.

"There's one," she said. "I'll show you. Come." And she kicked the dog as she walked away from the register.

Orville followed her through a narrow hall. Walls and doors were wood–all painted grey.

"It's on the top floor. I guess you don't mind."

"I don't mind," he said.

As she climbed a second flight he admired her legs, no rustic hair, smooth; her loose shoes sucked at her heels, making a pleasant sound. They climbed another flight.

"Ssss ... it's quite a way," she said, puffing a little. "Here ... here's the room."

Jiggling her keys she opened the door: messy luggage cluttered a corner, the bed was unmade, its sheets and cover scrambled. Pointing to the luggage, she said:

"The room belongs to a teacher, but he's gone for several days. I'll make up the bed, fix the room, clean it ... I was supposed to have it ready. Shall I fix it for you? It's twenty francs."

Rain had stained ceiling and walls. The floor was warped and window frames were warped. The ceiling seemed to dip toward the two windows. Someone had soiled the bedside rug.

Orville disliked the room, hated himself.

"Fix it," he ordered.

Perched on a chair, he watched her remove the luggage and change the sheets. She was silent, quick motioned, angry at this late hour job; she was scheming how she could latch onto some of his money by sleeping with him.

She spread fresh sheets ...

"I washed them yesterday ... they're dry," she said.

He said nothing, admiring her as he would admire an animal: bitch spreading sheets and cover.

"There," she sighed, settling the pillow.

As she straightened up, her arm bumped the crucifix on the wall by the bed; it rocked back and forth with a dry sound; with a frown she steadied it, but, as she steadied it, he felt she was waiting for a proposition.

"I'm with the Maquis," he lied. "I go into Germany tomorrow ... parachute drop ... How about sleeping with me tonight? I'll pay you two hundred francs."

"I'll come," she said. "I'll come later on ... I'll sneak you whiskey..." She had a huge smile: two hundred francs, Jesus, the man was crazy!

"Okay," he said.

"There's work to do ... some late customers ... I'll be late."

"Okay."

Like a drugged man he sat down, unlaced his shoes, lay down, and peered at the wall. He did not bother to take off his jacket. He stretched out on the cover ... and was asleep instantly. Just before he dropped off he felt the bed sink on one

side; he reached for the tank controls and heard a shell explode in the distance; he was falling ...

The flash of a table lamp woke him and he propped himself on an elbow and tried to recall where he was.

"What is it?" he managed. "Who is it?"

"It's me ... Suzanne."

"Oh."

She was carrying a hooded teapot, cups, a plate of cheese and bread on a tray. She set the tray on the bed and Orville blinked at it. The smell of the cheese helped him wake up. While she was arranging the cups and teapot, he shed his jacket. As she poured his cup, she explained that the whiskey was locked up: It's very late ... I don't have the key.

"It's about two o'clock," she said, and couldn't think of anything more to say she was so tired. Now she worried that he might refuse to pay her, or pay for the room.

"You work late," he said.

"Yes ... but not every night."

"Hungry?"

"Not much ... you fell asleep."

"Umm ... I did."

"Where are you from? ... You can tell me."

"I was born here."

"In Ermenonville?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

He observed her bloodshot eyes, and remembering that he had been asleep, he put his hand on his billfold: it was there.

He appraised Suzanne's body as he gulped the tea, needing the warmth to warm him ...

Jeannette was on duty ... the Rondes were in Senlis ... Lena was buried ... he ate a little cheese and finished the cup and pushed the tray away and began yanking off his shirt and trousers, troubled by the buttons and zipper.

"Have more to eat," he said.

"A little cheese," she said, hoping tea and cheese would lessen her weariness.

Before Suzanne yanked out the lamp plug, she encouraged him to see her nakedness: she placed the food tray on the wash stand; she combed her hair before the bureau mirror: she shook her hair over her shoulders. Her breasts were plump and rosy. She had rose nipples. Her belly was a working woman's belly: she was strong. Standing with her legs tantalizingly apart, fluffing her hair,

she dabbed cologne on her shoulders. Not a word.

Darkness, and then a small light, a lamppost outside the inn, revealed the wash stand and the brass bedposts–making them unreal.

The bed squeaked as Suzanne climbed in, hands and arms ready for him, mouth ready for him, her fatigue momentarily aside. She had difficulty arousing him; she wanted him right away; she was too tired for play; she scolded him and punched him with both knees; she muttered angrily.

”Come on, come on ... wake up ... I want that money ... you think I'm a slut ... I need money. You...”

She kicked him.

Disgusted with her, disappointed with himself, angry, he straightened her on the bed, slapped her across the face. Lying on top of her, weighing her down, he fucked her, she was tight, tough, skilled, peasant. Her mouth was slippery–big. He slapped it hard. Then again.

As his hate diminished, as he lay there, tired, fighting his sex guilt, he wished he could infect her. If she did not have syphilis he wanted to give it to her. It would leave her something to remember the war by. Then, he realized she could be cured easily, through penicillin. So, it did not matter. If she infected him ... that did not matter. Nothing mattered.

All this was worse than masturbation in a stalled tank.

His mind returned to the machines: the tanks were crawling through a dense mist, one bus behind the other, guided by a GI flashlight, a green dot, a blinking dot ...

In the morning, roosters woke him and he slipped out of bed before Suzanne woke; as soon as he was dressed he pulled out his billfold and left her 220 francs, on the food tray, between cheese and bread ... Suzanne ... farm girl ...

She would be pleased to find him gone–everything easy. Standing by the door, he ate a piece of bread: what if she became pregnant, was the thought and the bread tasted sour: and that girl in the hospital, what about her, what about her possible pregnancy?

Stealthily, he unlatched and squeezed through the doorway, no one awake: walking through the hall and descending the stairs was like passing through a packing box. As he neared Ermenonville, the sun yellowed the ground. In the Ronde kitchen, Annette was busy, her coffee smelling up the room.

”Good morning ... You're up early,” she said cheerfully. ”Did you sleep well?”

”Good morning ... mind if I have a cup of coffee?”

”I'll be glad to ... coffee and croissant ... in the dining room?”

”In the living room, Annette.”

He had made up his mind: he was leaving by bus: Paris: bus to Moire: then

rejoin the Corps. Gulping his coffee he told his future to go to hell. But there was something in the coffee, in the taste and smell of it, that tied in with the antiquity of the room, his past, the Chopin bust that was watching, mistrusting him. A second cup. And the coffee brought to mind the room where he had been born ... voices ... faces. It seemed to him he heard his mother. Smoking a cigarette, he wandered about, annoyed by the fireless fireplaces and their sense of accusation.

A copy of *Combat* lay on a chair: in a matter of hours life would become combat: soon life would be a thing of the past, like a newspaper, like a comic strip. The cat would jump off the sofa and disappear forever. The skull would revolve round and round inside the tank helmet.

He was dressing in his greasy mechanic's clothes when Jean appeared.

"Orville," she said, scared. "Orville."

She had never seen his face so tragic.

"What's happened?" she asked.

"I'm leaving ... you know I had to go ... tomorrow anyway."

"Claude phoned me ... he said ... why?..."

"Why," he repeated, without making it an interrogation, and glared at her.

She perched on the foot of his bed and her raincoat fell away from her shoulders, pinioning her hands. Her cheeks, flushed by cold and anxiety, were red.

"Talk to me," she said.

"There's nothing to talk about. I'm wearing these filthy clothes ... I have my ID ... I'll get to Paris on the bus ... there are fewer checks by the Moire route ... so..." Leaning against his chest-of-drawers, he hunted through his pockets for his lighter: no, it was in his jacket. His fingers touched his jackknife. The feel of it helped. "It's quite simple," he said. "I can't go on with you. I slept with a girl last night at an inn. It's back to the Corps. I'm trapped. I haven't guts enough to desert, so ... at the best ... we had two days..."

Jeannette rubbed her face and rubbed her hand over her eyes; she remembered crude things Orville had said; her love for him had died down, then welled up; she held out her lighter as he continued poking-poking through his pockets.

"Here, Orv..."

As he bent over the flame she said:

"I'm sorry I wasn't enough for you."

"It wasn't that." Or was it?

"What was it then?"

"I ... I have to go ... I..."

"I love you," she said.

"But I can't love you," he protested.

"Are you ill?"

”Perhaps ... another time ... maybe the war will end ... who knows what is going to happen!” He stifled a desire to say that he had a premonition of tragedy–that was nothing new in his life.

”You told me you loved me, Orv.”

”I wasn’t lying.”

She wanted to repeat: but what happened? She knew better than repeat that question; she knew, from those hospitalized victims, from their bitterness, their profanity, their cruelty, their shrivelled minds and bodies, something of what it was that was obsessing Orville. She picked up a shirt, placed it over the back of a chair.

”Let me fold your things ... let me help.”

”I’m putting things away ... in my chest-of-drawers ... hanging up things, as they were.”

She was hopeful he might return; she began to sob; life was being ripped away; her fingers trembled as she laid a folded shirt in a drawer: he was leaving his home, leaving his birthplace, leaving his Ermenonville; she tried to include herself in the picture. Throwing her arms around him she kissed him again and again.

”I’ll try to write to you,” he said, each word coming out hard.

”Letters,” she whispered, ”letters ... we’re not much good at letters ... how can you reach me ... how can I reach you?”

Was the fishing line on the two reels still damp?

When was it they had gone fishing together–years ago?

Crossing France was going to be difficult, contacting the Corps was going to be difficult.

His arm around Jeannette, facing the window, he gazed down on the lawn: Annette was entering the house, carrying Lena’s angora, René.

A door banged, and Claude’s voice echoed.

* * *

5

Dennison rejoined his Corps.

Their third offensive started during a heavy fog ... the tanks rolled forward slowly ...

Something red appeared and then faded almost at once; a rumbling sound was connected with the color and there was something else, some kind of motion.

Dennison tried to turn over on his side but pain knocked him out, and then the red flopped on again, floating, jelly-fishing. He tried to speak. Something prevented him. What was happening? Then, the red shaped itself into something, a wedge, a fuzzy glow, then became glass in a stained glass window.

Now he realized that he was lying in an ambulance; the window was swaying as the ambulance swayed. He recognized the sound of tires, the sound of a heavy duty motor.

Presently, the ambulance came to a stop and a man's voice droned, words confused with other sounds, motors, shouts.

Was this a convoy? Were they caught in a stream of traffic? Were they in a town? What caused the light through the window? Was it daylight? He broke into a sweat. How long had he been riding?

Inching to one side, he peered at a tiny light bulb, its filament a hairpin of orange between litter-bunks. A man just below had his arm flung out: someone must be fastened to that arm. The ambulance began to creep forward and the wounded man's fingers began to clench ... then pain galled Dennison.

He longed for a drink of water more than anything. He was sure that a drink would check the pain and ease the ride.

God, he worried, where's my dog tag?

Is this a German rig?

Have the goddamn Nazis got me?

When the ambulance stopped, Dennison was able to distinguish a cross in the window glass: the red cross was pale, old. Did German ambulances have red crosses? Voices sounded outside: German, French, English? Men were snoring in the bunks around him. Pushing himself to the side, he peered down angrily.

"Where are we?" he demanded.

No answer.

A bandaged foot protruded across the feebly lit aisle; the bulbous white mass shook, as if trying to reply.

"Hey, down there! Whose ambulance is this?" he yelled. He tried English, French, German.

As though on a crane, the foot lifted, swung onto the litter: a pool of blood trembled on the floor as the ambulance moved on. Dennison beat against the wall and then the ceiling. He was soaked with sweat. The exertion made him shake but he continued beating until his fist stung and his head and arm ached.

As he lay there, breathing hard, breathing fast, someone asked:

”What can I do for you?”

”Man, talk to me ... where am I?”

The fellow had spoken French: did that mean anything?

Dennison peered at a tousled head, a pair of dirty glasses on a beaked nose, a stubbled, dirty face. The dirty face grinned pleasantly. Dennison liked the mottled teeth and purple lips.

”You’re okay. Take it easy, huh? Did you think we was Nazis? Nah! Lie back! Rest. I’ll bring you dope ... we’ll soon be at the Fournier Hospital, in Rethel ... soon ... do you hear? It’s Catholic. Clean. Be there soon. Lie down...”

Reassured, Dennison lay back.

”Just some water ... just some water...”

”Okay.”

Things blurred.

”Now, here, swallow the dope...”

”Sure ... a little more water ... gotta have water...”

”Okay.”

Pain wormed in his arm and shoulder, and he wondered what had occurred. What had become of the tank? What had happened to Zinc and Landel? The last thing he remembered ... pain was burning closer, closer, closer ... Fingering his bandages, he poked at several wooden splints and tried to gauge the extent of his injury. Thinking to push back his hair, he felt a skull bandage; a sling was looped around his neck. His fingers traced the folds of the sling.

What the hell did that mean?

Both head and arm!

So I got hit two ways! God ... dammit!

The ambulance was swaying. Huddled under his blankets, Dennison recalled a face, a blonde face, a blonde face beside a chest-of-drawers ... that, that was Ermenonville ... that was ... In London, Jeannette had said ... Zinc had told him that ... and the fog, the heavy river fog and the heavy shelling ... somebody was ...

With the ambulance door open, he caught a whiff of fresh air, the air entering like something solid; leaning over, toward the edge of the bunk, he listened:

A snarling voice was saying something about the railroad: the railroad had been bombed ... no way to transfer wounded ... trucks were being used ... ambulances ...

”Have to get them out ... out of the city ... air raids ... no food. Two men have died in our ambulance. We picked up an American, he speaks French ... Have to find gasoline. On the train we had food...”

Windows and plasma and click of wheels, windows and plasma, a doctor

bending over, when was this, where? Someone had fed him. The clicking of wheels bugged him.

The man with the beaked nose and dirty eyeglasses brought Dennison a glass of pineapple juice–astonishingly good! As the man held the glass and straw the ambulance motor coughed, the juice spilled, the beaked nose swayed and almost fell.

"What a lousy road!"

Dennison tried to raise his right arm ... yes, the right arm, the arm in the sling ... they were moving again.

Pain closed in.

In mid-morning, Dennison bumped out of the ambulance into a windy sun. Within seconds someone spread additional blankets over him. He was babied by someone tall and grey eyed. Rubber wheels hissed. The sky swayed. Other Sisters-of-Charity appeared: the gurney tilted, the sky tilted: door after door whirled by.

Very soon he realized he was inside a room: its all-around whiteness assured him: he shut his eyes, longing for a sense of stability.

Morning moved into afternoon.

Afternoon moved into pain.

The probing of the arm began: two doctors, a surgeon, two nurses–a Sister Blanche attended Orville; his mind screwed up to a pitch and then blacked out. There were x-rays, painful shiftings of the body: his brain shut down again and again: then, the radiologist began talking; he had to have time for his pipe; then Dr. Pierre Phelan, the surgeon, spoke through his gauze mask. In Dennison's eyes Phelan's eyes were the eyes of cruelty, eyes inside a mask. Phelan outlined techniques for the two doctors. Now they were in surgery. Phelan was talking to a British medic. The Britisher was having a miserable time with his French. Egged on by pain, Dennison attacked Phelan, accusing him of carelessness, army bungling, come-easy-victims, goddamn sadism.

"I've been a surgeon for twenty-odd years, my boy. I've a sort of built-in skill. Not easy to shake that skill. Besides, let's skip that. You see, Dennison, there is no alternative! You've lost nerve ends. The brachi- and pronator teres and humerus are badly damaged..."

"I want to see my arm," Dennison objected.

"Lie still."

"Get me a mirror!" He was hollering. He tried to control his voice: he was being womanish. "Give me a mirror, damn you ... I want to see my arm."

"If I thought it would help you I'd let you see your arm. My boy, you can't tell one bone from another, one muscle from another. Even our radiographs can't help you."

The Britisher, a tall young man, a Londoner, was sympathetic: putting his hand on Orville's good arm he begged him to trust Phelan:

"Be reasonable ... try to be reasonable. My god, you think we want your smashed arm? What will we do with it? Can we sell it?" Realizing that his humor was crude, he added: "Easy, Orville ... we're looking after you ... believe in us."

"It's not your amputation," snarled Dennison.

Turning to Sister Blanche, Dr. Phelan ordered her to jot down notes: notations about the skull x-rays, the arm, wrist, and hand radiographs: he dictated in a Midi-voice, a tired, harsh, old voice.

Dennison attempted to follow the medical terminology, still unconvinced.

"What about my head injury?" he asked.

"You mean, what's wrong?"

"What happened ... nobody has explained."

"It's a combination of severe bruises and a scalp wound ... not serious, Monsieur. Lucky there. We're certain about those injuries. Confident." Phelan clicked his pen against the side of the examination table. "Trust is what you lack ... cover him nurse. Don't you see he's shivering!"

Dennison felt himself roll with pain.

So the shelling had gotten his arm!

It was lying there beside him, and he was powerless to move it: smashed bones, shredded flesh, stinking flesh ... that's how it was! Still he wanted to see his arm and attempted to turn his head, his mind at loose ends: but he was being wheeled on the gurney; he sank into his pillow, moaning.

"I can't go through life without an arm," he said to the nurse as he rolled through a hallway. "I can't..."

Back in his room, he called Sister Blanche to his side.

"Wait a few days ... give me a chance."

"We don't dare wait," she replied.

"Another day..."

"That would double the danger."

"I don't believe it."

"You must believe in us," she said, fixing his covers, adjusting his bed, understanding and love obvious in her face.

"It's my arm ... mine ... it's mine."

Dr. Phelan appeared.

"We have reviewed the x-rays ... it's conclusive, my boy. It's surgery. Later, when it's all over, I'll do a detailed drawing for you."

Later, he rechecked the injury, gauze mask over his face: he probed, hating the stench, examining, re-examining tissue, bone; he checked potential bleeding, planning his surgery.

Dennison swore, gutter filth, wild, French, English.

The doctor dictated more notes to Blanche–oblivious.

"Now for the injection," he said to her. "We'll take him as soon as the theater is free."

As Dennison began to go under the strong sedative, he heard Sister Blanche talking:

"You talk big ... very big ... of course you must talk like that ... it kills some of the pain ... it helps ... I know ... I had two nephews, good at swearing. Dr. Phelan's right ... you know ... you see, I've helped him through the years. Sleep now, my son. Be quiet in your mind, Orville. God will take care of you. You will be all right..."

Orville was thinking:

I've been longing to be alone ... the war's nearly over ... I'm alone ... for sure ... and what have I got?

Waking, he attempted to disregard the pain: curious, how pain warped his shoulder and spread lower, with rod-like jerkings. Strange, how hot that part of his body felt. He wanted to remove the bandages, strip his arm, let it cool. The nurses had applied the bandages too tight. And there was that inner gnawing, in the very marrow: it seemed to pour into the heart valves and scald them. Hand hooked over his face, he tried to remember something that might free him.

Free ... Jeannette ... she could free me ... a face ... not morphine ... not ... got to keep myself from cracking up ... Sister Blanche, let me talk to you ... Paris ... yes, when I recover ... no, I was in Paris as a boy, yeah ... yeah, I liked Notre Dame ... I like those flying buttresses ... they're the best part of the church ... you have to contemplate the church from the rear garden ... apse, by the Seine ... those bronze figures walking on the roof-line ... notable ...

He complained of more pain and they brought ice packs. He sank into a sweaty dream, a war nightmare, woke, and found Sister Blanche giving an injection. When she had finished she bent over Orville and wiped his face with a linen towel, patting the skin, whispering kindness, encouragement.

"What?" he murmured. "What is it ... what did you say?"

"This will help you rest," Sister Blanche said, wanting him well, loving him.

"Ah," he sighed loudly.

Already she had searched his belongings and found his ID: there was little else to go on, just some letters, crumpled letters, love letters. Often Sister Blanche wrote or wired or phoned the patient's connections, knowing what a visit from a loved one or friend could mean. Jeannette's bloodied letters stumped her although she could read a little English; with the help of the British doctor they read Jean's scrawl and made out the address at the hospital. As quickly as possible, Blanche wired Orville's condition. A card from Colonel Ronde gave his

Marseilles address: she wrote there.

In her room, later on, in a cockroach wing of the hospital, she lay down, her cap and rosary on her bed table. The telegram did not satisfy her. As soon as she could she got up and wrote a detailed letter, writing on a battered leather portfolio that was a treasure of hers.

Would the letter reach Jean?

Since there was no electric current, the amputation had to be postponed: the emergency generator had no fuel.

Dennison's fever was 105° ... he could not eat or assimilate liquids.

Blanche's sixty-year-old restlessness forced her into the chapel where she knelt in her favorite pew. She prayed for his recovery and for those under her care: she named names: the list seemed to reach across France: she begged that the war come to an end, that mankind reach a state of harmony: harmony? Harmony, her subconscious asked. With all the wounded, the millions dead?

Dennison woke in pain and rang his buzzer.

Perspiration soaked his head: he knew his arm was worse: he must have help: in his panic he felt he must contact Jeannette, Uncle Victor, Aunt Therèse, his mother: he did not ask what could come of such a contact: he wanted to hear a familiar voice, wanted to grasp that somebody cared: somebody might know of some way to help!

A young nurse bent over him and asked him what he needed: her golden crucifix pointed at the "v" in her throat; her stack of hair was auburn: he knew he had never seen her before: eyeing her intently, his sight now clear, now blurred, he said:

"I want you to contact my uncle ... Colonel Victor Ronde ... please write down his name and address."

She wrote his name but Orville could not remember his Marseilles address: his mouth was open to tell her the Ermenonville address but he lost consciousness.

His fever dropped, increased.

Madly, he shuffled through the past, catching at straws: the face of Lena, his mother's face, his dad's photo, Jeannette ... his brain kept repeating his home phone number: 964-1904. Friends were rowing on Lake Cayuga ... it was late afternoon but the crew launched their shell ... the coxswain was sore as a boil as the crew made the water foam ... a lone heron winged over the inlet ... he was climbing a waterfall of ice at Watkins Glen ... it was February ... now it was Easter and he was playing tennis ... no ... no, I'll never play tennis again ...

Desperately, he tried to move to relieve the pains in his back: the smell of his own bandages and medication gagged him: he fought to breathe, to swear at Landel ... he wanted to kill him ...

”It’s your fault, damn you! You ordered us to advance across that bridge ... your fault ... your fault...”

Yes, there had been heavy fog at the bridge, sticky fog, clinging to the periscope, the visors ... pain ...

Sister Blanche heard him talking, whispering, swearing when she came on duty. At one a.m. the power came on: they removed his arm: two surgeons, four nurses–and Blanche.

By seven o’clock that night they had brought him around, through injections, plasma, medication, renewed dressings, ice packs, kindness. To encourage him, Sister Blanche told him she had telegraphed Jeannette ... his brain latched onto Jean ... Jean ... Ermenonville ... he knew that Blanche was on the right track.

To comfort him, Blanche sat by him and told him stories about her nephews and days in Brittany, days on the beach, days at sea, sailing, fishing: her voice became a singsong: he hardly listened and yet he assimilated thoughts, flecks in her life. She watched over Dennison for eighteen hours without much relief: she supervised transfusions, bed changes, dressings, medication, dope, liquids: stretched out on a cot by his bed she caught catnaps.

A gentle rain woke her, just after dawn, the drops signalling at the window: Blanche called it ”our rain:” in her world rain was something angelic: it had always been that way since childhood, since those springtimes along the sea: it was forever promising: and this morning, standing by Dennison’s bed, while he slept, it seemed to her that this shower was also promising.

In an upstairs office, the rain patterned Dr. Phelan’s windows as he sat at his desk, tired, thoughtful: he was hungry and thought of phoning for coffee and rolls and goat cheese (his favorite): he thought of Orville and others: he jotted down the day’s routine for Dennison and then picked up a phone.

Jeannette had endeavored to phone Phelan but could not make a connection. Claude sat at his phone for a long while. Although it was almost impossible he managed to find gas, fill the tank, adding six extra liters: avoiding main roads he drove Jean to a southern town, as far as he could drive. The usual black taxi was waiting. Kissing Claude, she drove off, until a damp distributor killed the engine. Boarding a crowded bus she travelled deeper into Provence. Where was Rethel? Was it a military base: someone said so. Was it under Nazi domination? Two hours, three hours ... she stopped looking at the time.

The driver of a Rethel taxi had no windshield wipers and kept popping his head outside. Huddled in the back, in a chilly corner, under a lap robe, she counted and re-counted her money. Her overnight bag bumped to the floor as the chauffeur braked for cyclists. Did he know where he was going? Was he out for an extra fare?

In front of a saloon, they picked up a wounded civilian and his twelve-year-

old son; the wounded man was suffering; his son repeated over and over, for his dad's benefit: "We're on the way, we're on the way." Jean was reassured they would soon reach the hospital.

What an ugly Provençal town! A crummy Montmartre! Towns were not tacky like this in Wisconsin. The war had deteriorated almost every building. The streets were a series of potholes.

There was the Catholic hospital, fronted by many columnar cypress, a neat three-story building, presentably white: its barren flagpole in a small winter garden told its story: the taxi swerved, stopped, and the chauffeur released the door handle. The twelve-year-old helped his father out.

Jeannette, grabbing her overnight bag, struggling with her purse, waited for the fare.

"Mademoiselle, I never ask a nurse to pay ... or the sick ... that man is one of ours..."

"May I give you something?"

"No, Mademoiselle ... thank you ... and you, lad, help your father up the stairs; the office is to the right."

The blotched and smiling face drove away.

She flew up the rainy steps, and into the foyer, a nurse on duty in the office, saying "wait." She shepherded the civilian and his son down a hall. Returning in several minutes, the sad little face, under stiff cornet, said:

"You can't see Lieutenant Dennison ... you cannot see him now. I have been requested to inform anyone who comes."

"Is his condition very grave?"

"Yes ... If you care to wait, there's our little chapel." She pointed down the hall. "There are magazines on the bench." She pointed again.

"I can't read anything ... I can't ... you see he's..."

The sad little face regarded a sadder face.

Jean left her overnight bag and went outside and stood a while on the steps, the rain a benison: at a nearby baker she bought rolls and drank coffee at the only table in the chilly entry. The china cup warmed her hands: she refused to look ahead: it was something to have arrived at the town, to be close to Orville: a girl of seven or eight asked Jean for a roll or piece of bread: the rain had beaten the already beaten clothes of the child: Jean bought her bread and hot chocolate and they sat at the table together, silent: back at the hospital, a nurse admitted Jean into Orville's room: she saw, at once, that his arm had been amputated. He was unconscious.

Hiding in the little chapel she began to sob, handkerchief stuffed over her mouth. There was hardly any light in the room. A bouquet of bedraggled flowers leaned against the base of a plaster statuette of the Virgin. Alone in the chapel,

sitting at the end of a pew, Jean cried until there were no more tears.

No bomb, exploding during the London blitz, had left her like this: Orville, without his arm, alone: her love had not been able to sustain him: what promises could she offer?

She had to wait until mid-afternoon to see him: entering his room warily, afraid, she noticed that the window curtains were nearly closed: his face was in a deep shadow, his head deep in his pillow–a stranger's face. Bearded.

"Darling," she whispered. "Orv ... darling ... I'm here ... darling ... it's me..."

"Jean," he responded. "Sister Blanche said that you had come ... I was waiting..." His voice trailed off.

She kissed his cheek, stroked his forehead, puzzled by the head bandages; she hoped she was going to react sanely.

"I'm going to be sick," he said, in a faint voice.

"I'll help you," she said, and picked up his kidney-shaped pan. "Now," she exclaimed professionally. "See, I'm here to take care of you. See!"

"It was nothing," he said, breathing jerkily. "Nothing ... if nothing came up, I guess I've cleaned house."

"Of course you have," she said.

"Ah!"

"Is your pain severe?"

"Not now ... not bad."

"Can I stay? ... I won't stay long. Shall I talk a little? You just lie there and listen, huh? How about that?"

In spite of his pain and uneasiness, in spite of the darkened room, he was aware of her beauty, beauty of now and Ermenonville: there was serenity in her voice: he thought: if I could raise my head a bit I could see her better, all of her. He moved and pain got him; her voice went out, her face simply wandered off somewhere, leaving a blouse and skirt, an outstretched hand.

"Jeannette..."

Eyes closed he felt that they had never parted: he knew that Suzanne–was that the woman's name?–was a lie: war could not take Jean away now: they would be okay together: maybe they would visit Paris, maybe they would ...

As Jean sat on a chair by his bed, silent, hands in her lap, tears in her eyes, he slept, and, for a while, sagging to one side in her chair, she slept. Sister Blanche woke her, smiling her wrinkled smile, her eyes alight, her cornet in perfect angle.

"He needs to sleep," she said, bending over both of them.

"Yes," Jean whispered. "Are you his nurse?"

"I'm Sister Blanche."

"You sent me the telegram! Yes, of course, of course. I'm Jeannette Hitchcock. He's my ... Orville is mine. I guess you know. I guess my letters told you."

She wanted to shed her shyness and hug her.

”I’m so glad you are here. Now, now we’ll see. He’ll get on his feet again.” What a quaint pronunciation: was Jean Canadian, from Quebec? It must be so.

Jean was standing, ready to leave.

”Won’t you come outside, so we won’t disturb him?”

”Yes, we should go out.”

In the hall, Sister Blanche grasped Jeannette’s hand and then put her arms around her. Youth, it’s such a wondrous thing!

”Is his head injury serious?” Jeannette asked. ”I didn’t know ... tell me about him...”

”His head injury isn’t serious ... multiple lacerations, bruises ... we will be removing the bandages in a few days.”

”Did gangrene get into his arm?”

”Yes ... gangrene made the amputation more complex. Of course Dr. Phelan, our head surgeon, tried to save his arm ... all of us tried ... there wasn’t a chance.”

”No chance at all,” she repeated.

”None at all.”

”I’m afraid he’ll take it hard.”

The hallway of the hospital seemed very cold.

”Of course he’ll take it hard, but he has fight in him ... he’ll win out ... now he has you, my dear.”

”It’s not as simple as that.”

”Not many things are simple in life. But with rest, with love ... and now you, you must get some rest. Go to bed. You can’t rest sitting in a chair. You can phone me at any time. Let me give you our number–my extension. You should stay at the Racine Hotel ... the Nazis have cleared out of town, I am told. Let me phone the hotel for you ... come, my dear, I must jot down my number ... come...”

Jeannette thought it was a long way to the hotel: her overnight bag was light but the blocks added up when she followed Rue Carot by mistake; she had been told to follow the Rue Carrefour ... in minutes she registered and unpacked in a second floor room; in minutes she was sound asleep, to wake in an hour or so, refreshed.

The sun was setting. In front of the hotel a man was polishing his car. She saw no soldiers on the street. She ate in a cafe and found the food better than the food at the hospital in Ermenonville. Rethel, old, walled, citadel shaped, was more interesting without the rain: there were neat shop windows; in the tiny square there were pigeons, benches and a fountain with a boy on a stone pedestal, a sheep by his side. In a corner store, near the Racine, she spotted a dress in the window; with a few alterations it would fit, orlon, bright, bright daffodil, tightly

belted, the belt-line high. Buying it, she felt encouraged.

It was fun altering it in her room, trying it on, powdering herself, lolling, street lamps coming on, the sky trying to make something of its stars.

Carrefour–the street sign read under her window: sitting in a rocker she read the name many times.

In the lobby, she bought a morning paper, hoping for good news. In the taxi, spreading the sheets, she read:

ALLIES INVADE NORMANDY.

Nazis are retreating.

End of war near.

Jeannette wanted to shout the news to the driver but his face was so grim she felt he might be a collaborationist. Anyhow, he might have heard the news over the radio. What would Orville say? Should I tell him at once?

She went on reading, reading an editorial about the sixty million people who had already died during the conflict.

On the phone a nurse had requested that she wait till eleven ... a little before eleven someone beckoned. By that time she had become troubled; in Orville's room she had to fake gaiety. "Look, darling, I've bought a new dress ... for you."

She held out her arms to him.

"For your one-armed hero," he said.

"Don't say that!"

"It's quite true. Perhaps you hadn't noticed! You'd better take a good look at what's happened to me!"

Hypnotized for an instant, the loss of his arm appalled her again: she couldn't take her eyes off the bandages: so, he would never be able to throw his arms around her or lie on top of her: would he have to buy a mechanical arm? A mechanical hand? Uncertain of herself, sick in her stomach, she stepped to the window to watch people passing below, along the street, the pine tree above roof tops suggesting utter loneliness.

"Turn around," he commanded. "I won't hurt you. It's a nice dress. Don't be afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid," she said, but she could not turn around, thinking of his bandaged head, how it made a clown of him.

"What's wrong then? Don't hate me ... that won't help us."

She was trembling.

How could he speak to her that way! His coarse voice, belligerent voice. Would he continue to have intercourse with other women? Would he become a homo?

"Are you going to stand there, like that, with your back toward me?"

Squeezing her hand around her throat, she managed:

”Just let me tell you the news … the allies have invaded Normandy … it’s in the paper … I have the paper here.” This was her momentary defense.

Facing him, biting her lip, she held out the paper, hoping he would be encouraged by the promised cessation of hostilities.

”Let’s hope for luck,” was all that he could say.

”Sister Blanche has communicated with your uncle … perhaps he can come … he has phoned…” She could not continue.

”Let me see the paper.”

”Yes … yes … I sent you some carnations. Haven’t they come? A boy promised to deliver them … he…”

”One of the Sisters is fixing them.”

”The paper?”

”Yes…”

He reached out for it and then pain slapped him, a rough spasm, cramping his fingers, shutting off his speech: staring at Jeannette, he waited, hoping he could make it back.

Sensing his anguish and bewilderment, she spoke lovingly, bent over him, kissed his bearded face.

”It’ll go away … it will go away … be patient … dear, Orv … patience … Orv … lie back against your pillow … patience…”

”I can’t see anything. Can’t…”

”I’m right beside you … shut your eyes … wait … that’s it … think how nice it was when you went canoeing … remember those long hikes in the Adirondacks … how about that time you camped with your mom … how about that?”

As pain diminished, he imagined a glossy photograph on the wall of his Ithaca office: it was a photo of his first apartment building: three floors, brick, slate roof: maybe it was imitative but so what! Outside, on the street, pedestrians were walking in the snow, shoes crunching: the campus chimes were ringing: I’ll be able to do a lot of walking, skiing …

She kissed him, her mouth lingering on his.

”Don’t pity me … don’t!”

The pain was gone.

Later he said:

”Better throw me out … just chuck me … suppose I’m impotent. Do you want an impotent man around? I’m not sure I’ll be impotent … I feel…”

His unshaven face continued to bother her, she tried to see him as he was when they cycled along the Nonette, his smooth cheeks … his smile as the trout hooked his fly.

”Hush … don’t imagine things,” she objected.

”Give me a drink, Jean … a glass of water … my Pershing arm is thirsty.”

"Yes, Orv, yes."

What if he committed suicide like Chuck?

He slept fitfully, through war dreams and serious pain, travelling that route for several days and nights, gaining little, losing a little, angry, difficult, at times abnormally calm. He began to enjoy his food. He began to look ahead. Began to avoid self-induced fabrications. He knew he must learn to write with his left hand. How long would it take to become proficient? He would have to learn by himself. Certainly he would have to learn to sketch–with a reasonable amount of skill.

How would Jeannette bear up under his problems ... would she be an outsider? When he made love to her would she resent him, his armlessness a continual influence? In his probings he understood more and more that she symbolized hope. Stealing glimpses of sanity through pain, he knew they had become a pair in London ... together they might fly home, sail home.

He wanted to phone Aunt Therèse and Uncle Victor but the physical task of phoning was beyond him; there was no room extension; he asked Jeannette to talk to them. He had her write to his mother: he tried to dictate the letter but bogged down completely. With the help of Sister Blanche he informed the army of his condition; the Red Cross sent information; Dr. Phelan telephoned; official forms were forthcoming. Orville did his best to keep from sweating out these problems.

Drugged sleep settled many things.

Was sleep another deception?

Maybe sleep was a second floor or attic. Basement?

Memory–he scudded through his memory, testing it: King Francis ruled at the time of da Vinci; Napoleon invaded Russia in 1812; Haley's Comet same year ... King Cyprus knew the name of every soldier in his army; Mithridates spoke twenty-two languages ... if memory could be so dependable then it must be equally possible to forget–erase horrors.

In a wheelchair, outside French doors that opened into the hospital's walled garden, he enjoyed a Sister scattering seeds for the winter birds: what a whir of wings, flash of beady eyes, about her skirt and cornet! He wished he could walk the garden, the brick paths so trim, the flowers in angular beds, medieval statues in hedge corners. What were those red-leafed shrubs? As he sat, dreaming, wrapped in blankets, Jeannette placed both hands over his eyes.

"Here you are, up again, and outdoors. How lovely!"

She swished in front of him and peered at him.

"It's getting so I have to hunt around for you. Gee, you look lots better," she enthused, kissing him, amused by his Airedale-colored bathrobe and mousy slippers under his blanket. "Somebody shaved you ... you're my old Orville!"

He was delighted to see her but could not crawl from beneath his serious mood: he wanted to shake himself: a loving and grateful smile was all he could offer: she sensed that he was fighting a mood or was in pain and waited, chatting with a nurse, enjoying the birds, ready to fit into his world.

It had been a stand-up ride on the local bus, and she sat on a bench, after rolling his chair close by.

"Sister Blanche brought me some letters from E," he said. He patted a pocket in his robe. "I heard from Isaac Jacobs ... Zinc. Quite a scrawl from him."

"Oh," she exclaimed, at a loss, worried about Orville's reactions. "How is he ... any news?"

"He's been discharged ... hernia ... bacillary dysentery. He's returning to Ohio. Landel has disappeared. Zinc says our Corps has been disbanded ... not enough survivors."

Every word, every thought about the war, disgusted him.

He glared malevolently at Jeannette, blaming her for the loss of his arm ... Could he borrow one of Robinson's arms? How about Chuck? He didn't need his arms any more. One might fit.

"Does it seem a long time ... a long time ago that you were with Zinc?" she asked, trying to feel her way.

"Let's go inside!" he replied, and shoved at his skull bandage, its awkwardness annoying him.

In the hospital corridor, peering at his sliced off shoulder, seeing himself in a hall mirror, he said:

"Only fools return to the country that does this kind of thing to them! Only the craziest of fools."

"Orv, let's not talk like that. It will get us nowhere."

As she wheeled him toward his room, he said:

"When I have gotten hold of a Woolworth arm, let's get married."

"Please don't joke," she said, afraid of his humor, afraid that she could not bear up.

He said nothing more until they were inside his room.

She offered him his medication but he pushed it away.

"The war news is encouraging. No doubt Germany's beaten. I can make a try at things back home. A try at living. I'm serious, Jean. Listen to me. Sit down and listen ...

"I want to marry you. Will it be all right? Just don't pity me–understand! We can get married in, in Rethel, if you wish. You can decide where. Will you? I love you ... Let's try to make a go of it. Shall we?" He asked, and yet he knew how little he had to offer. As a swimmer, he recognized, he was far from shore.

Her face softened and became very beautiful. Bending over him, she kissed

him lovingly, and then laughed, laughed sadly, agreeing: we'll likely make out pretty well.

"All right ... it's okay ... we'll get married in Rethel."

"As soon as I can ... soon as you wish."

"I'm glad, darling."

A red barn and lots of snow, she thought. I'll be able to aid him, in Wisconsin, in New York.

"Please help me into bed ... I'll do my best ... I have to say it ... it won't be easy!"

Settled under the covers, he lay motionless, stiff, tired, his fingers in hers, the undercurrent of doubt coursing through him: too soon they would be aware of daily dilemmas and responsibilities: plugging through life alone might be more difficult; together they might knock down a few hazards.

Probably a B-29 would fly them to New York; on back pay they might honeymoon in the Adirondacks; then, by train–the Black Diamond–to Ithaca; they would rent an apartment overlooking Cayuga. Sometimes he would see his mother. He would obtain architectural jobs. There must be clever ways to produce models. Maybe *papier mâché* or wood.

He remembered his dad ... remembered the island of poplars, shadows on the island, swans, the carved white tomb reflected in the Petit Lac ... he remembered a fire in a Caen stone fireplace, Jeannette on her bike, her hair streaming in the wind.

*   *   *   *   *

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