

May 14, 1944

"Okay, so here's the deal, and listen carefully!"

Sergeant Duncan pushed the front of his helmet up and looked at his clipboard. "What we're going to do today is go to the ship, go down the rope ladders into the boat, and then go up the ladder back onto the ship. The brass wants to know how long it's going to take you to get back on the ship in case there's a last-minute change of plans."

"We're going to be marching all the way to the pier?" Gomez was short, but he looked like the hero in a Western movie.

"What, you got something better to do, pretty boy?"

"No, just wondering, Sarge."

"For some reason they're going to send some trucks to pick us up and take us to the boats," Duncan went on. "We're going to run

through the exercise, and then they'll bring us back. General Gerhardt doesn't want Gomez to exhaust himself!"

"When are they going to stop reading our mail?" Kroll asked. "My girl feels like the Army is made up of Peeping Toms."

"Kroll, the only letters you get are from your mother, and she just writes because she's bored waiting for this thing to kick off."

"The whole battalion is going to get on the boats, then climb back on the ship?" I asked.

"I don't know, Woody, but when the colonel comes by, I'll tell him you have a question for him, okay?" Sergeant Duncan gave me the look and spit on the ground. "And wash your face before we start off; you don't want to scare any of the Navy guys. Any more questions?"

There was a lot of grumbling, but no questions.

"This is one of those stupid exercises they pull just so it looks good on paper," Sergeant Duncan said. "It's a wonder they don't have a bunch of Krauts standing around with stopwatches."

"If it's a maneuver to save our butts one day, you'll be glad to have the practice under our belt." MacIntyre was thirty, one of the oldest men in our outfit.

"Mac, are you practicing to be somebody's grandmother?" Sergeant Duncan asked. "Because that's *just* how you sound."

Duncan told us to relax until the trucks came. I had just settled on my cot with a bag of peanuts and a soda when the whistle blew

to get up. I slung my backpack over one shoulder and went out with the others.

“Here they come,” Gomez said, pointing down the road. “There’s only about eight trucks, so it can’t be the whole battalion going.”

The trucks stopped about a hundred yards from where we were.

“What are they waiting for?” Gomez again.

“Probably waiting for some officer to get his fingers out of his rear end and tell them to start,” Duncan said.

“They’re moving again!” Minkowitz was blade thin and looked out of place in a uniform.

The trucks were standard two-and-a-half-ton jobs, or deuce and a halfs, as Duncan called them. They came in a close file, and then all made a simultaneous left turn so that they were facing away from us.

“They call that soldiering in Transportation,” Sergeant Duncan said. “I call it bullshit.”

“It’s a black outfit,” Stagg said. “Probably from Fort Meade.”

“Nah, they keep all the Negroes down at Gordon in Georgia,” Duncan said.

A driver and a passenger got out of each truck and stood at parade rest next to his vehicle. It was pretty sharp but, like the sergeant said, it wasn’t much that anyone else couldn’t have done. I thought I recognized one of the drivers. I looked closer as the Colored crews were given the command and opened the back tarpaulin flaps.

The one I thought I knew glanced over to where we stood. I did know him.

“Marcus!” I started toward him and saw him frown at first, then watched the frown turn into a big smile.

“Josiah Wedgewood! What the hell are you doing over here?” Marcus Perry put out his hand, and I grabbed it. “They gotta be desperate if they’re going to let you do any of the fighting.”

“They called me special to come over here and clean the Nazis out,” I said. “You hear anything from home?”

“My mom said that they’re rationing food up in Richmond,” Marcus said. “How about you?”

“Man, Bedford, Virginia, seems like a whole lifetime ago,” I said. “How long you been in England?”

“Two months of sitting around doing nothing,” Marcus said.

“You still infantry?” I asked.

“No, I never was,” Marcus said. “They sent me up to Fort Dix, and then down to Meade. I’ve been cleaning trucks night and day. I don’t know if they expect us to drive them or sell them to the Germans. How about you?”

“Still infantry, still 29th. I got over here eight months ago and I’m ready for some action,” I said. “I’d like to tell my folks what England looks like, but they won’t let us put anything in our letters about where we are.”

“Same here.” Marcus leaned against the side of his truck. “Hey, wait, I did hear something from home. You know the Martin kid?”

The one with the gap in his mouth? He took his car to Bud Speck's garage, and while he was showing him how it kept stalling, it started up and he ran over the mechanic's foot."

"You think there's something wrong with that boy?"

"Could be," Marcus said. "Oh, here's my boy, Grant. He's from Philadelphia."

Grant was a big dude, heavier and blacker than Marcus. He came over, and I shook his hand.

"You guys hear anything about when the invasion is going to kick off?" I asked.

Before Marcus could answer, Sergeant Duncan was up in my face. "Soldier, are you with the 29th Infantry?" he asked. "Because if you are, get your narrow little ass over there and get into one of those trucks!"

"Ride up in the cab with us," Marcus said. "You're skinny enough to fit."

I got in the cab with Marcus and started telling him what my mother had said, that the whole town was praying for us and hoping we would do well.

"We'll do all right," Marcus said. "How you like England?"

"To tell you the truth, I can't understand them half the time," I said.

"A guy started talking to me in a pub the other day, and I didn't understand a word he was saying," Marcus said. "He kept buying me beers and running his mouth, and I didn't know what he was talking about."

"I can't understand them none of the time," Marcus's friend Grant said. He was sitting between us. "I thought they were supposed to be talking all proper and shit."

"I can understand them in the movies," I said.

"There's five hours' difference between here and home," Marcus said as he started up the truck. "You know what I catch myself doing all the time? Figuring out what the folks back home are doing. Like it's nine o'clock here, but back home it's four in the morning. Everybody is still in bed."

"You thinking on what you're going to do when this is over?"

"I don't know, maybe go to college, or at least think about it." Marcus's truck was third in the line, and I noticed he kept a tight distance with the truck in front of him. "How about you?"

"I don't know, but I think I should be making some kind of decision," I said. "I was pretty good in art, but my dad doesn't think I can make any money off of it."

"Drawing pictures?" Marcus looked over at me.

"Yeah."

"Somebody got to draw them," he said. "Might as well be you."

"Hey, how come you guys got to go to a pub?" I asked. "They won't let us off the base."

"That's because they're only letting the Transportation Corps off the base," Marcus said, grinning. "We got a better image than you grunts."

“I think it’s because they need us to win this war for them,” I said. “We’re not going to beat the Germans driving around.”

“I might run over a few of them,” Marcus said.

We reached the waterfront, and I hopped out of the truck. I felt great seeing Marcus and was still smiling as I lined up with the other guys from the 29th.

“How many times have we been up this damned gangplank?” Lyman was bitching again. “I could do this in my sleep.”

There were some officers already on deck. I recognized Colonel Cawthon and Captain Arness. They told us to relax.

“Take five!” Cawthon called out. “Smoke them if you got them!”

Some of the guys started lighting up. There weren’t any seats on the boats, so the men sat down right where they were. We had just about all got off our feet when somebody blew a whistle.

“One platoon, Baker Company, into the LCVP. Move it!”

There was the usual cussing as the thirty men from one platoon went to the side of the ship, over the low railing, and down the rope ladder into the small boat that was going to take us from the transport ships to the beach once the invasion actually started. I slung my rifle over my shoulder and looked at the men in the boat straightening themselves out. The guys with the semiautomatic weapons were up front, then the machine gunners, and then the rest of the guys with M1s and the soldiers carrying the mortars. There was just enough room for the men to stand facing forward without touching one another.

The LCVP pulled away about twenty feet, then the whistle blew again, and the sailor in the open wheelhouse brought the small craft back against the ship.

“Back on deck! Back on deck! Move it! Move it!” Captain Arness had a bullhorn this time.

Climbing up and down the ropes was pretty easy when the water was calm. You just had to watch out so that nobody stepped on your hand. I watched the men scramble back up the ropes quickly. A sergeant stopped at the top of the ladder and helped the others.

“You see that! You see that!” Cawthon was yelling. “That was perfect. Wrap it up, wrap it up.”

The whole thing was over after the first try. Then somebody got the great idea that we should march back to our tents. I found Marcus before lining up with my platoon.

He took my hand and put his arm around my shoulders.

“When you write home, tell your mama you saw me,” he said. “I’ll do the same thing for you.”

“Will do,” I said.

“And take care of yourself,” he added. There was some real seriousness in his voice.

“You know I’m going to do that,” I said. “Those Germans haven’t seen what Bedford men are about!”

Marcus and I shook hands again, and I told his friend it was nice meeting him, even though he hadn’t said anything much.

The trucks took off without us, and we started double-timing back to our camp with Sergeant Duncan cursing every step of the way.

I'd known Marcus Perry most of my life. His high school football team was pretty good, maybe even as good as Moneta's, the school I had attended. Once when we were both working at Johnson's Hardware, we had talked about who would have won if the schools ever played each other. They didn't, of course, because he went to a Colored school, but it had been fun to talk about.

The trip back was brutal. The only time we rested was for five minutes, and then it was back on our feet again. We had to be carrying thirty pounds of gear. The M1 rifle weighed nine pounds all by itself.

I was in the best shape of my life. I was still skinny, but it was a hard skinny, and I felt good about it. I figured in a few months I'd start to grow a beard. At first I wouldn't trim it too much. Just let it grow out. Sometimes I would look into the mirror and think of myself as a soldier. I looked pretty good, or at least like somebody you wouldn't mess with.

The last mile or so was really hard. Some corporal I didn't know was pushing us, and guys were yelling at him to stop being so gung ho.

When we got in sight of the camp, the corporal spotted a platoon of engineers and increased the pace of the cadence until we were almost side by side with them.

“Yo, BA Company! We got a bunch of Girl Scouts to our left,” our corporal shouted. “Can we beat them back to camp?”

We had already run almost a mile and nobody wanted to race, but nobody wanted the engineers to think they could beat us.

“Cadence count!”

Somebody started counting faster than we should have been running, but we all started moving faster. Then the sergeant jogging along with the engineers started picking up their pace, and in about the time it takes to spit on the ground we were racing that engineering company through the streets of southern England. Women that we passed turned and watched us and probably thought we were a bunch of fools — the weather was hot and humid, and here we were racing down the street as if it mattered.

We got back to the camp — which was really just a huge bunch of tents with barbed wire around them — a few seconds ahead of the engineers. Kroll, a decent kid from Jersey City, beat their lead man by fifteen feet. There was a lot of shouting and fist pumping. I let out a few yells, too, and then I threw up.



“Hey, Woody, you think the Germans are over there doing push-ups and crap while they’re waiting for us to invade them?” Sergeant Duncan again. “I mean, what do you think they’re thinking?”

“How can you tell what a German is thinking?” I asked. I had washed and brushed my teeth and was feeling almost human again. We had eggs and sausages for lunch, along with the usual Jell-O and

ice cream, and I was feeling pretty good. “When I try to think about what they’re thinking about, I have to imagine them thinking in German.”

“People don’t think in different languages,” Duncan announced, as if he knew this for sure. “You think in pictures, not words.”

I didn’t know about that. I thought in words and I could think in pictures sometimes, and figured that the Germans must have done more or less the same.

My mind wandered to Marcus and how glad I was to see him, and then I started thinking about home. A stream of images came to mind. The corner of Bridge and Main where I got hit in the face by a sloshy snowball on my first day of high school. Green’s Drug Store when me, Mom, and my younger brother, Ezra, went to get medicine for my father, and Mom didn’t have enough money for the pills my father needed. The pharmacist said that he had some cheaper pills.

“They’ll do the same thing,” he said.

I was standing down a way from where Mom and Ezra were and I saw the pharmacist go behind the counter, wave the pills in the air, and bring them back to Mom. They were the same pills, he had just let Mom have them cheaper. That’s the way things were in Bedford when I was little. It hadn’t changed much, either, but I had.

After lunch I decided to write a letter to Mom and another one to Vernelle Ring. I wished I could have told them more about being in England, or what the English people were like. I thought they would have liked to know that the English drink their beer warm,

drive on the wrong side of the street, and talk so damned fast you can't make out what they're saying half the time. But the censors just kept crossing stuff out, or even cutting it out.

It had taken most of my courage to write the first letter to Vernelle, and I knew I hadn't done a good job of letting her know how I felt about her. Well, maybe the truth was that I wasn't too sure how I felt about her. I liked her, and she was a nice kind of girl, but I didn't know if I loved her or anything like that.

"Hey, Woody, are you writing another letter?" Freihofer sat on the edge of his bunk, a towel over his head.

"Yeah, I'm writing to my mom," I said.

"So, what're you saying?"

"Why?"

"So I can write a letter to my mom," Freihofer said.

"I'm writing her that thirteen thousand American planes bombed Europe last week," I said.

"You can't write that," Freihofer said. "It'll be censored. That's like giving secret information to the enemy. What are you, a spy or something?"

"That's what it says in the *New York Times*," I said. "How secret can it be if it's in the *New York Times*?"

"You ever think that maybe the *New York Times* is a spy newspaper?"

"I'm also saying that Eisenhower thinks it's going to be an easy trip all the way through Germany," I said.

"The newspaper said that?" Freihofer asked.

“Yeah, he’s telling the French people to stay off the roads to let us pass,” I said.

“Yo! Duncan! You hear what Woody’s saying? He said that Eisenhower is telling the Frenchies to stay off the roads when we get there!” Freihofer said. “If he says that even before the invasion begins, he’s got to expect this whole thing to be short and sweet!”

“I told you that. Didn’t I friggin’ tell you that? This is a mop-up operation! The Germans don’t want to fight.” Duncan was nodding his big head up and down and scratching his crotch as he talked. “We walk in, we kick their tails all the way back to Sauerkrauten, then we mess with their women. Did you know that German women are all about six feet tall and blond?”

“That’s good,” Freihofer said. “I mean the easy part. I don’t want to get into any heavy fighting.”

“How can a country win a war when all their men walk like geese and they follow a little misfit who can’t grow a mustache?” Duncan asked. “Did you know that the greatest German ever — that Beethoven guy — was deaf? He composed all their best songs and he was deaf! That make sense to you? Does that make sense to you, Woody?”

“No,” I said.

“They beat the French in no time,” Freihofer said. “But if Eisenhower is telling people to stay off the roads already, he must be pretty confident. Tell that to your mom, Woody. She’ll be glad to hear it.”

“She’ll be even gladder to see me when I get back to Virginia,” I said. “Me and Marcus, the black guy I was talking to today, signed up together, and then we went to my house and told my mom. She was crying, and laughing, and hugging us both. I was eighteen then, I’m nineteen now, and I’ll probably be twenty before she sees me again.”

“Your mom’s a religious nut, right?” Duncan asked.

“No.”

“Then how did you get a name like friggin’ Josiah?”

“The family name is Wedgewood,” I said. “Somebody in the family found out that we were vaguely connected to the British Josiah Wedgwood family that made dishes, and I got stuck with the name.”

“What kind of dishes?”

“I don’t know, plates and cups and saucers — stuff like that,” I said, seeing that the conversation wasn’t going too well.

“You’re a nineteen-year-old, but you’re skinny and young enough looking to be sixteen,” Sergeant Duncan said. “And you’re named after a friggin’ cup! The Army is supposed to make men out of you boys, but you’re never gonna make it, kid. You’re never gonna make it.”

I thought I was going to make it. What they said about the Germans not really wanting to fight, I believed that, too. I just couldn’t see a Kraut standing up to an American.