

MEMORIES OF HOLLY WOOD



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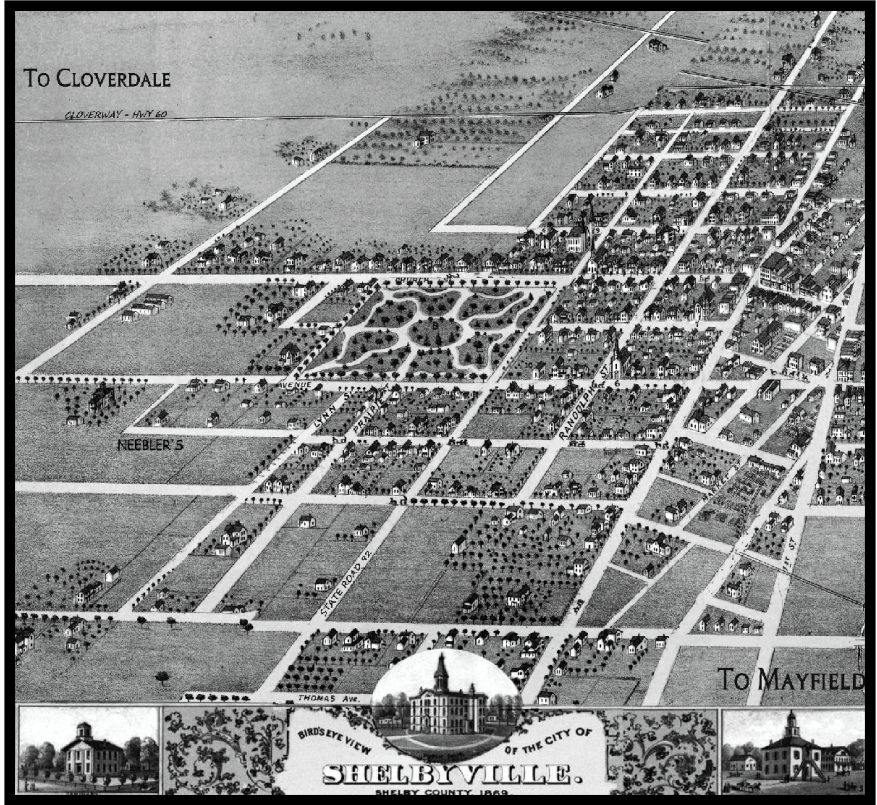
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Some actions and characters are based on historical events or actual persons to add a sense of time and place to the story, though this work is presented to the world as 'fiction,' not as a factual account.

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Dedicated to Anthea, my alluring muse and the “real” Holly Woode, and to our three miracle children, Rich, Jack and Cassandra, who provide an infinite source of inspiration.



ONE

“My wife *is* the most beautiful woman in the world,” John would declare with a broad smile to anyone he’d meet.

“And I should know.” He’d go on to explain, “As a young artist, I studied facial symmetry and bone structures around the globe. I can probably *mathematically* prove she’s the most beautiful woman in the world. It’s just a fact.”

But John knew his wife’s hair was now laced with silver where there was once gold, though it still flowed in long, gentle waves. He thought of the age on her face as simply lines where smiles had been.

Old John watched her as she drifted back to sleep in her threadbare recliner. She loved that old chair so much more than her little bed. With the patchwork quilt covering the single hospital bed, he had to believe Shelbyville Memorial was doing their best to make the *assisted-living suite* feel homey.

He pulled the quilt up to cover her shoulders. He remembered when they were toned and golden from their exotic get-aways in the sun, so many years before. Their world of islands, ocean liners, seaplanes, guests of world leaders, adventure. But for now, John tried to focus on her serenity as she slept. The hint of a smile that lingered on her lips; the silver hair framing her face. He prayed she was dreaming of their many escapades.

John’s adoring eyes began to glisten. He held his aged face in his hands for a moment, but then caught himself. He inhaled and stood with the help of his cane. No time for frailty. She would scold him if she were awake, “*It takes fewer muscles to smile than to frown..!*” He smiled and exited the room, lit only by the glow of the hospital’s outdated television.

Though a contemporary hospital by Shelbyville’s standards, the small-town facility appeared to be trapped in past decades with a flair for the late-70s. Mint-green terrazzo floors reflected

the humming fluorescent lights. The nurses and doctors were not frantic or abrupt as they'd be in larger cities. They gave warm smiles and nods as they made their rounds. The nurses still had passé nurse hats pinned in their hair. The doctors wore white lab coats as they walked with stethoscopes around their necks, peering down astutely at clipboards. Pleasant Muzak provided a harp-laden "Everything is Beautiful" from unseen speakers.

Old John gently closed the door to room 102, struggling to not make a sound. He took a seat on a well-worn hallway bench. After gazing at the floor in reflection, he looked up to see Nurse Shelley approaching. He cleared his throat and grinned.

Nurse Shelley, heavy and with an eternal smile, paused when she saw John's eyes. She had a soothing Jamaican accent, "What's wrong with you? Visiting times are supposed to be happy times."

With glossy eyes he sighed, "She doesn't remember *any* of our travels, Shelley. Not the White House, cruising the Congo, our little cottage in Nassau -not even the swanky shows in Havana." He paused, "-Or the places I almost didn't make it home from..."

Shelley paused with sympathy. "I guarantee you she remembers the important stuff." A smile, "You let me know if you or your wife needs anything." She peeked over her shoulder and added with a whisper, "I can sneak you something gentle to help you sleep if you need it." A quick wink.

"Thanks Shell," John smiled. "But I'm going back in to lie with Holly, maybe catch the late show." He beamed at just the singular thought of lying with his bride. Shelley grinned and nodded before continuing on her way, humming along to the hall's tune.

It was finally the end of a long day for Jill Avery. The same day she'd overheard her new coworkers describe her as "pretty but tired." Rather than commenting on her abilities, her workmates whispered, "*She could do so much more with herself...*" Jill's long hair and trim form made her seem younger than her mid thirty's. She had pretty features and dimples that came out on special occasions. Her fair skin revealed it had been years since a sunny vacation. She made only a cursory attempt at make-up, reflecting a rushed new mom working long hours in a tedious new job. She walked the hospital halls with authority, clearly an

employee, but in her dated business suit she was no nurse – and definitely not anyone with a doctorate.

Regardless how weary, Jill flashed a smile that lit the hall as she approached the elderly and handsome silver-haired gentleman. “Hey, John.” She was unsure if he remembered her, “We met last week –I’m new in accounting upstairs..?”

John’s entire face seemed to smile. “Of course! We chatted when I was telling stories to that little Girl Scout... Lori, I think was her name.” He was clearly no beginner at charming young ladies. With an engaging smile, he slid over for Jill to take a seat.

She sat, plopping her purse, sweater and Tupperware beside her. “Aren’t the scouts the cutest in their little uniforms? They really cheer the place up.” Jill felt instantly at ease, unloading as if she hadn’t spoken to anyone on a personal level all day. “Fridays are my night shift. I’m waiting for my husband to pick me up; got another hour.” She leaned in, slightly embarrassed. “My husband got a job up at the new Wal-Mart. We just have one car right now.”

John smiled at her humble admission. “Commendable work, retail. Sounds like you got yourself a good, hard-working man. A lucky man, too.”

She smiled as the gentleman put her at ease. “Thanks.”

“I’d be *honored*, Miss Jill, if you’d keep an old man company while you wait.” He shifted to face her, pausing with drama, “Did you know that my wife Holly –lying in room 102 right behind me – is the single most beautiful woman in the entire world?”

“Aww...” Jill tilted her head, “That’s really sweet.”

He sat upright, “No, really. My wife is *literally* the most beautiful woman in the world. It’s all about bone structure that has a balanced left and right symmetry. It was agreed upon on three continents, two islands and by heads of state. Her face was used in print ads and famous art for decades. It’s a fact.” He smiled and winked.

Jill raised her brows, unsure how to react. “Well... if you’ve got the most beautiful woman in the world in *that* room, what are you doing out here?”

“Oh, Holly’s sound asleep,” he swooshed his hand. “I wouldn’t interrupt her golden slumber for the world.” He patted his bench. “I’m stayin’-put right here. I haven’t missed a weekend with Holly in sixty-one years.” He withered slightly, “–Even

though the last twelve years were in here..."

He leaned towards her, matter-of-factly, "Since you work here, I'm sure you already know why she's here..."

She shook her head. "I don't work with patient records. I mostly do accounting."

He rocked his head as if debating what to reveal. He then shared the diagnosis as if he'd done so a million times. "You see, my beautiful wife is insane."

Jill was utterly caught off guard. Her eyes darted and she opened her mouth, gasping for words.

"I know, I know..." He lifted his hands, "'Insane' is a word we're not supposed to use. It's not '*correct*.' But they've thrown around quite a few terms over the years: senile dementia, schizophrenia, retrograde amnesia..." His eyes seized Jill's wide green eyes. "But no matter how many times they've upgraded or downgraded their diagnosis, it didn't make it any easier that I was being gradually robbed of my adventure partner." He paused, seeing her discomfort. "Oh, don't worry. She's no harm to anyone. That's why she's able to stay here in Shelbyville's finest."

Jill had no hint where to even begin. She knew Shelbyville Memorial had an assisted-living wing and a small psychiatric ward, but she didn't realize she was sitting in it. Stammering, she couldn't think of anything more original than the cliché, "This must be very...difficult."

John squinted his eyes and nodded, inhaling with optimism. "I treasure every single minute when she knows who I am. There are some days -like today- when she looks at me with her big blue eyes and I'm a complete stranger. But if there's a day we can have a real conversation or can reminisce, it's a magnificent day." He chuckled, "Hell, even my memory slips from time to time. But just the short term, because I *vividly* recall every detail from when we were young." His lips extended into a smile as if the thoughts were racing before his eyes. "...Back in the days when things were the epitome of *good*."

Jill was instantly moved by the man's words and feelings for his ill wife. "How long have you two been married?"

He turned to her with a new sparkle, "Married sixty-one years, one month and...fifteen days. Some of the most magical times a man could ask for. And even with our peaks and valleys -and there were plenty- I wouldn't change a single thing."

Jill smiled, feeling an involuntary tear emerging from her eye. She sat silent for a moment, uncertain if her life felt the same way. She wondered *would Ed talk about me like that in fifty years?* Probably not. He hadn't uttered a sentimental notion in years. Jill thought men didn't talk about their wives –or about anything– with that sort of passion anymore. She wiped her tear with a Wendy's napkin from her purse, attempting to steer the conversation in a different direction. "So, are you just going to sit out in this hallway all night?"

"Holly usually nods off early." John gestured to the nurse station at the end of the hall. "The ladies here keep me company, listening to my stories 'till I'm ready to hit the rack."

"Hit the rack?" Jill winced, "You sleep here?"

He glanced over his shoulder towards the nurses, and then leaned in as if revealing a secret. "This is a small hospital in a small town. No big-city bureaucracy to spoil my last, single pleasure. Not only can I visit every day, but on Friday nights they let me spend the entire night with my girl. Shelley calls it my 'sleep over.'" John whispered, "*Please* don't tell the new director, but Shelley rolls in a second bed just for me. She's been doing it for twelve years." Another quick wink.

Jill repositioned herself to completely face John, a sudden need to know more. *Is this man for real?* "They let you do that? That's so romantic." And then she had to ask, "How did you two meet?"

John blossomed with a palpable glow. His face even seemed rosy. She'd hit upon the magic question, instantly transporting John to another time.



TWO

"I first had the *privilege* of laying my eyes on Holly Emelia Woode sixty-four years ago, three whole years before we officially met. Shelbyville used to have an annual harvest festival -we called it 'Our Town'- 'round about 1940. I was with my best buddy in the whole world, Jack 'Lucky' Neebler." John scrunched his nose, pronouncing *Neebler* as a funny sounding name. Old John could see the images before his eyes as if from a flickering movie.

It was a sunny autumn Saturday with patchy cool breezes. The entire community was out with their families in laughing droves at the country festival. To John, the day was reminiscent of the many Norman Rockwell paintings he'd see years later. Proof that such places and times really existed. Ladies shuffling through the crowd, carrying wax paper-wrapped cakes and pies. Boys with crew-cuts and dimples shouting, zigzagging and ricocheting through the people.

Young "Lucky," with a slight but perceivable limp, seemed short next to handsome young John. Lucky was by no means a bad looking kid, but next to John, his ears seemed large, he had bangs that hung across his face and almost no tone to his body. Conversely, handsome John would look in the mirror and see himself as dashing as the swashbuckling Errol Flynn -or at least in his mind.

Some Shelbyvillians said *Lucky* earned the moniker due to an endless string of misfortune. If there were a mirror nearby, he'd somehow find it, stumble and manage to break it. If a black cat were anywhere within a one-mile radius, it would prance out of its planned course to cross Lucky's path. Just one day before, Lucky gained the courage to smile in the general direction of (who he believed to be) the prettiest girl in school, Melda Goode. As he did so, he tripped down the stairs, twisted his ankle and fainted from the pain. A lunch lady had to drag him to the clinic. Despite the many chuckles at Lucky's expense, John stood by his buddy, who he knew was a dependable, good-hearted fellow and his best friend.

John and Lucky were finally high school seniors, and they walked with the commensurate air of triumph. For the Our Town festival, they'd inadvertently dressed the same in their Sunday finest for the opportunity to be seen by the town's beautiful but forlorn ladies. Lucky slightly hobbled but kept up with John as they strolled through the crowd of impressed townspeople.

When they passed the pumpkin contest, they tried in vain to lift Tad Jessup's first-place winner. Tad told them his dad's trick to big pumpkins was to spit Skoal on the plants once a day. A chilly breeze caught the scent of butter from the roasted corn skillets. The boys were then nearly trampled by little girls, dressed in fall colors, racing to play musical chairs around tables overflowing with baked goods. Two boys hid under the table to reach up and pick the edges of the crusts.

As John inhaled, engrossed in his surroundings, Lucky reverted to the tired topic that troubled him. "Look at everyone, happy and paired-up. There's *no way* Melda would ever come close to even considering the *possibility* going out with me."



Before he could reply, John gave his charming, square-jawed smile to four young ladies. He was used to Lucky's perpetual lack of self-confidence. "You go to the library every day just to gawk at Melda. You've checked out two hundred books about Hemingway, cooking and horticulture and you haven't even said 'Hi.' If you can ever muster the guts to ask her out, there *is* a chance she won't go out with you. But if you never ask, it's guaranteed. I say roll the dice, buddy."

As Lucky pondered John's same reply for the umpteenth time, they stopped to watch the largest hog contest. A plump woman shouted "*Sueey*" as she slapped her pig's rump. As she did so, her farmer husband hollered her name, "*Sus-ie*," with a pat on her backside. The leathery old farmer looked back grinning to see who got the joke. Same joke as last year and the year before. The pig owners' country-fed wives always made stiff competition.

Lucky turned, hunching with a clucking laugh. As he did so, the thighs of several cheerleaders brushed by. Lucky inhaled, taken aback at the potpourri of perfumes. With a stutter he asked, "Do y...you think those farmer's wives started out young and smelling good like them?" He inhaled again, deeper.

John watched him, "Are you having another one of your asthma attacks?"

"I h...hope not."

Assembled in the field in front of bleachers and banners, the cheerleaders of the Shelbyville Huskers enthusiastically cheered as the football players were announced. The crowd went wild for their hometown boys -most being some variety of relative- cheering over the brassy school band.

John turned to gaze, not at the players, but at the girls. "I'll go to the game, but it won't be for the players."

They watched several of the girls climb into a pyramid. Lucky studied them in awe as if beholding the actual construction of the pyramids of Giza.

As John was about to applaud, a slim hand tapped his shoulder. He turned and froze, his jaw falling open. The once valiant boy, now in blinding headlights.

To John, her voice was that of an angel. "Would you like to buy a carnation to support the team?" asked the celestial figure in the cheerleading uniform. With her wavy blonde hair and eyes

like glass azure marbles, Holly Woode flashed a smile that hypnotized the unflappable John.

"N...no thanks," John stammered as he stared for one second shy of eternity. He was face to face with *the* Holly Emelia Woode, the most beautiful creature to ever grace the valley –and the United States –and probably the world. He'd seen her plenty, everyone had. When people uttered her name, guys had to grip a handrail to calibrate their balance. Even the other girls looked to her in admiration. She was the girl everyone upheld as a role model: teachers wanted her as a student; classmates would ask her to tutor them; parents wanted their kids to be friends with her. Little sisters played dress-up to look like her. Boys instantly developed a form of uncategorized paralysis in her presence. If children ever got in trouble, their mothers would scold, "Why can't you be more like Holly Woode?"

John needed to take a quick mental inventory. He knew he wasn't a bad looking guy, but he never contemplated actually speaking to her. He only knew of her existence –like knowing there were white tigers in Asia– but never anticipated a situation where'd he have to reply to her.

She remained in front of him, only a second had passed. She gave a warm smile, "Don't you have a girlfriend who might like a flower?" Holly seemed genuinely sweet, not the snob stereotype that some girls presumed before they'd meet her.

John blushed as he tried to rein-in his thoughts. *Holly Woode asked if I had a girlfriend... Is she trying to find out if I have a girlfriend?* He finally blurted, "N...No, ma'am, I do not." *Did I just call her ma'am?*

Holly squinted in recollection, "Aren't you the fella' who won the art show?"

John bloomed like one of her carnations and stood two inches taller. "Yeah, that's me..." As he hoped to expound, he saw Holly step back, engulfed into the swirling crowd. John wilted as she gave one last smile as hands pulled her into other directions, moving on, offering flowers for her team.

Little Lucky slapped John on the back, whisking him back to reality. "Good job! You really rolled the dice on that one!"

John gazed into the direction in which Holly vanished. "She knew who I was! Did you hear her? She wanted to know if I had a girlfriend..."

Lucky snorted a chuckle, "Yeah right!"



THREE

The elder John remained on his bench beside his enchanted new friend, Jill. She leaned in, engrossed in the gentleman's tale. "So her name was actually *Holly Woode*?"

He nodded, "The perfect name for such a beautiful, radiant girl, don't you think?" His eyes narrowed, "I continued to see Holly that year, but only at a distance through crowds at school or the rare occasion of passing in the halls." Despite his age, John seemed to effortlessly recall the sights, sounds –smells– and adolescent energy within Shelbyville Senior High.

It was another bustling morning as students flooded the halls like carpenter ants. Young John dodged his way through the obstacle course of faceless neighbors. Aside from Lucky, he really didn't know any of his classmates. He didn't care if he knew any of them or not.

John made a halfhearted attempt to attend his senior year simply for the extra hour of art class he'd finagle out of Mrs. Kay. She would somehow record it as extra credit, bartering approval through John's actual teachers. Mrs. Kay was initially drawn to his artistic talent, as unrefined as it was. A never-changing theme of exotic islands, palm trees and alluring pin-up girls. An argument could've been made that some of the pin-up art was inappropriate, but the male authorities never complained. At one art show, John gasped when he saw Guidance Counselor Rohrback approach his latest painting: the silhouette of a scantily-clad island

girl with a glass of wine watching a sunset through swaying palms. John ducked behind a desk planning his escape. –But Rohrback leaned within four inches of the painting and...leered. Some viewers began to comment that the idyllic females in his art began to resemble a certain student, Holly Emelia Woode.

Conversely, Mrs. Kay had zero credibility with John. He considered her completely void of any artistic talent. She was formerly a physical education teacher before being *advised* she'd also be an art teacher due to some vague budget cuts. John considered high school art teachers on par with elderly boxing coaches: maybe they could teach it, but certainly weren't able to do it themselves. But she was a pleasant lady who let him do pretty much whatever he wanted.

The truth was, John found his teacher's green eyes and classic bone structure appealing. She was also one of the few who listened to his wild stories. As he got to know her, she'd scold him maternally –discussions about his future, to follow his imagination and talents. Words to the effect that John should run away, far from Shelbyville, to maybe New York, California, Europe... He should see the world for people like her who never will.

It was in that same class that John was first introduced to Lucky Neebler's solitary existence. Lucky was placed into the art class after he got pulled out of P.E. due to a doctor's note about his asthma, fearing he might get "too excited." Mrs. Kay appreciated the effort Lucky put into his art more than the paintings themselves. With poor Lucky, Mrs. Kay never departed any wisdom of chasing dreams or traveling the globe.

The few people in town who knew Lucky could already predict his destiny. His father Sam owned the oldest grocery market in Shelby County. With only him and his dad to run it, people would already approach Lucky if they needed a special order of seed or a whole pig for a barbeque. The next fifty years of Lucky's life in the groceratorial arts had been clearly mapped out for him.

One morning, as the first bell rang, handsome John walked in a daydream through the swarm of chattering students. Through the sea of faces, his eyes caught an ephemeral glimpse of Holly Woode approaching from the other direction. It was no surprise; he knew her route every morning like a superspy. But this time, in John's mind, she seemed to pass in slow motion. The world

around him slowed as if they were underwater. Holly slowly shook her head from side to side, swooshing her golden hair from her sweater. Coming out of a slow blink, her eyes seemed to recognize John who was petrified in his steps. He was surrounded in a flowing silence as she gave her hypnotic smile. She mouthed a simple "Hi" as she continued on her way. A ship smoothly sailing through a chaotic sea.

In Holly's wake, John returned to the real, fast-paced world around him. The clamor of the hall resumed without missing a note.

Walking beside him, Lucky had been babbling the entire time, oblivious to Holly's brief emergence. Lucky was mid-sentence, "...So can you believe Melda has my same English teacher? She said Hemingway's *To Have or Have Not* is also Melda's favorite!" Lucky smiled, engulfed in his own dream come true. "I've seen Melda around for years -and now I find out we like the same stuff!"

As they walked, each emerging from their own personal fantasies, several large young men moved in behind them. The largest of the three hulking football players, in their varsity sweaters, swooped-in behind Lucky. The boy squatted and waddled behind Lucky, mocking his limp. The other two thugs laughed like hyenas. When John turned to look, he was standing face to face with team captain Kurt Cromwell.

This was not the first time he had to defend his pal. John wasn't nearly as large, but stood strong. "Why don't you guys just lay off?"

Kurt was surprised by John's fortitude. He bobbed his head in front of his buddies, "Ooh...Looks like *Neebler* has a body-guard."

Lucky interjected between the men, sadly defending the thugs. "John, th...these guys are just foolin' around. I don't mind."

As a teammate stepped beside Cromwell, the third goon crouched behind Lucky. Cromwell then pushed Lucky backwards, losing balance and stumbling to the ground. He landed with a thud as several female giggles emanated from the growing crowd.

John's eyes became fierce and his face turned red. With both hands, he shoved Kurt Cromwell in the chest with surprising strength, sending him off balance. Kurt's buddies looked at each

other, confused.

Kurt regained his poise, looking at his chest as in *how dare you touch me?* He lunged at John who stood unflinching. However, with Kurt's size and weight, physics took its expected course and John fell back like an axed timber. John struggled to bench-press Kurt off of him, to no avail. With no other tools available, he glared into Kurt's eyes and then head-butted him, his forehead cracking into Kurt's pug nose. Kurt let out a girl-ish yelp when he saw blood gushing from his nostrils. His two teammates quickly dove in, pulling their snarling pal off of John.

As the crowd hushed, Kurt pinched his nose shut, giving him a nasally, high voice, "I'm not breaking my hand on you before *my* game. After homecoming, you watch out Art-boy...*And* your gimpy sidekick."

John smirked. *Art Boy and gimpy sidekick?* It sounded like a bad comic book.

Kurt looked at his mute teammates. "Come on, fellas. Save it for the field." The most original line he could come up with. The three men gave threatening leers to John and Lucky as they walked away. John remained solid, scowling at the men with fists at his side.

Lucky tried to compose himself in front of the audience, fixing his hair and tucking in his shirt. "They woulda' killed ya'. What could *you* have possibly done? Take out your dangerous paintbrushes and paint them?"

An eyebrow went up. John's eyes twinkled with an idea.

FOUR

Fourteen hours later, the schoolhouse was quiet. The evenings allowed the tired building recovery from the day's stampeding crowds, screeching chalkboards and hourly bells.

Somewhere within the pitch-dark halls, a footstep on the wood floor broke the silence. A beam of light illuminated a wall, zigzagging, searching for something. The circle of light paused below a brass plate reading "Hall of Fame" and over a framed photograph of "Most Valuable Player - Kurt Cromwell." Wise-ass Kurt, sneering his pug nose in glossy black and white.

In the darkness stood a figure dressed in all black. The beam of light emanated from a flashlight that he moved to his left hand. He opened a small container and lifted a dripping paintbrush towards the picture of Kurt. With just the simplest stroke, Kurt Cromwell sported the infamous Hitler mustache. Perhaps immature and cliché, but somehow remarkably effective. Amazing how a single one-inch stroke could turn a hero into the villain. The brush continued to elegantly dance in the air, proceeding to add devil horns, glasses and buck teeth to the entire football team.

The figure clenched the paintbrush in his teeth like a swash-buckler as he took a step back to admire his handiwork. With an approving nod of his head, he clicked off his flashlight and whistled, casually strolling out a side door that had been left ajar with a silver dollar since noon.

The following morning, homeroom was more abuzz about

the vandalism than a kicked hive of bees. Everyone speculated, "You know who I bet did it..?" Some were more know-it-all, "I heard it's treason to paint a *Hitler*."

The only two sitting quiet, seemingly uninterested in conjecture, was Lucky and John. It was 8:15 and Lucky had already perspired through two shirts and a sweater. He was pale and nauseous as he nervously tapped his foot. To his side, John sat calm, casually drawing a flawless sketch of a beautiful blonde in his notebook. The girl's face was clearly that of Holly Woode.



Ms. Brodka, their bass-faced teacher, tried to settle the class with a monotone, "Okay people, I'll wait...People, I'll wait...People..."

The intercom suddenly blared with screeching feedback. A female voice crackled, "Ms. Brodka, can you please send John Gable to the office?"

All eyes turned to John, who seemed indifferent. Lucky's eyes and face telepathically projected -without the use of words- "Oh shit."

Principal Healy was serving his fifteenth year as Principal, eternally passed-over for superintendent -and he took it out on his staff daily. He considered himself a warden of sorts, rarely

giving favors unless something was in it for him. He dressed and carried himself as something more important than he was and would surround himself with cronies that would jump at every word. He wore three-piece suits, round spectacles and clearly patterned himself after Saturday matinee G-men.

John sat in front of Principal Healy's desk, which was purposely raised three inches to intimidate. Another man with ashen, leathery skin stood off to the side of the room smoking a cigarette. The smoking man wore a black suit and hat and leaned against a file cabinet as he blew smoke into the air.

Healy peered down his spectacles as he skimmed through a ragged file. After an awkward silence, "Hello again, Mr. Gable. The faculty knows you as an imaginative young man who fancies himself as something of an artist. Last night's vandalism seems beneath your abilities."

"Is that a compliment or an accusation?" John crossed his arms.

Healy removed his glasses and squinted, "I've noticed a trend since your mother passed away..." He turned on instant sympathy, "...which we were sorry to hear about. Is your father back in town?"

The man in the corner blew a smoke ring into the air.

John looked over at the man then back at Healy. "My dad's still stationed at the Embassy in Mexico. My nanny lives with me." He shrugged, *so what?*

Healy cleared his throat and spoke succinctly. "Teachers say you daydream. Wild stories of adventure and misplaced homework. Another fight yesterday defending that *cripple* friend of yours. Now defacing public property. My recommendation will be expulsion."

John sat up straight, struggling to maintain his cool. "You have no evidence I've done anything."

The man in the corner stepped forward holding a small slip of paper. Healy's mysterious associate played the part of gruff movie detective. "This, son, is a copy of your receipt for the paint you bought at Emery Hardware. *Our team* has matched it to the paint on this." The man held up the Hitler-defaced photo of Kurt.

In the bad cop/worse cop routine, Healy then threatened, "Mr. Gable, fess up or I'll bring in your little friend Mr. *Neebler* as your accomplice." He mocked Lucky's last name.

John's eyes imperceptibly widened. He did not want Lucky involved. How dare they implicate his defenseless buddy? In this game of wits, John blinked. "How'd you know I went to Emery Hardware?"

Healy and the man looked at each other and pompously laughed. Healy replied, "We didn't. It's the only place in town that sells paint." The man holding the "receipt" crumbled it into a ball and tossed it at John. A blank scrap of paper.

John didn't flinch as the paper bounced off his shoulder. "Maybe you got me, maybe you don't." His voice finally cracked with the first whiff of concern, "But where would someone go if they were...expelled?"

The man in the corner gave a wide grin, "That's why I'm here, son. Your father has some impressive connections with the government." The man winked at Healy who smiled smugly.

John tried to think. "Who are you with, the feds?"

The two men laughed even more arrogantly. The mystery man responded, "In a way I am. I'm Jenkins, recruiter for the United States Army, son. How'd you like to use your talents to help your country fight the real Hitler?" Jenkins approached to sit on the arm of the chair next to John. He leaned in, "Maybe you've heard of some of the Army's more exotic ports of call: Bermuda, Trinidad...?" Jenkins had sold this to kids a million times.

Naïve John squinted. *The Army really has ports there..?* He liked the sound of those ports. In movies, the Army always seemed stuck in some drab, war-torn third world country. *But Bermuda and Trinidad?* His buddy Lucky had a collection of Pan Am travel posters of those same exact islands.

When young men made rushed decisions, irrevocable arrangements could happen just as fast. Since John was only seventeen, he needed a parent's signature on the Army's enlistment application. When John explained that his father was out of the country for another month, Recruiter Jenkins was happy to assist with the signature.

John found himself surrounded by numerous other gullible young men at the Shelbyville train station. Shelbyville's oldest landmark stood two-stories tall with a bell tower and classic gables and dormers framed in Chicago brick. No one in Shelbyville knew exactly how old the station was, but drawings of the original

one-story incarnation appeared on a map dated 1865, at the end of the Civil War. It had intricate moldings and trim painted in French vanilla and two ticket windows adorned with brass. Wick-er paddle fans turned in arched breezeways, which were filled with most of Shelbyville, there to see their boys off.



The folks waved small American flags they'd purchased at Neebler's Market for the upcoming July 4th. As their sons boarded the huffing locomotive, a hiss of steam spewed and a shrill whistle blew. Mothers cried for their sons. Fathers stood proud with stiff upper lips. Younger siblings wondered if they were getting their brothers' bedrooms. The entire community waved as their boys stared wide-eyed and secretly nauseous from the back of the slowly departing train.

John squeezed in between two larger boys at the rear of the caboose. With his mind racing in hyperspeed, the crowd was waving in slow motion. He scanned the crowd, though he had no mother there to cry. He searched the proud faces as they shrunk from the chugging train. John felt some relief when he spotted his buddy Lucky waving at him. Then something drew his attention to the far left -his eyes were magnetically captured by those of Holly Woode. She wore a patriotic red, white and blue sundress and her blonde hair blew in the warm breeze. It may have been John's imagination, but she seemed to be waving just at him.

As the distancing crowd shuffled, the hulking figure of Kurt Cromwell moved to Holly's side. He appeared to put his

arm around her small waist. Kurt looked directly at him with a smirk. John felt his stomach plunge into his quaking knees.

When someone accidentally bumped John, he lost his line of vision. He could no longer find Holly, like trying to find the same star twice in the sky. Holly, Lucky -and even Kurt's sneer- vanished within the fading crowd.

Shelbyville was gone.



FIVE

"Off to be a man..." old John continued. He looked blankly down the hospital's hallway as he reminisced. "That bastard recruiter left out the part about basic training at Fort Benning. I melted fifteen pounds off that summer."

Jill had her knees pulled up comfortably on the bench as she listened. "You were so young, away from your friends..."

John nodded, "I sure missed home. Lucky would write me almost weekly with all the updates. Still, all I could think about was Holly and the rest. Graduating, kissing in celebration, throwing their hats in the air..." He looked down, his thoughts trailing. "Everyone heading off to college, beginning real lives in the real world."

Jill tried to empathize during the pause. She'd almost graduated community college. She never knew if people really threw their hats in the air like in movies.

"Fort Benning, Georgia." He looked up and continued, "I'd stretch out in my basic training cot, trying to get to sleep in the muggy heat, way before air conditioning. My barracks was built of concrete cinderblocks and had no fans. I'd play a game where, instead of counting sheep, I'd close my eyes and try to see Holly's smile. When I finally could, I'd pull out a notepad that I hid under my pillow and I'd draw her from memory. I placed the pad up under my bunkmate's mattress above me so I could sketch. I'd draw until he'd yell for me to stop -or until I promised to draw him his own gal. Soon I was drawing pin-ups for the entire

company.”

John’s face turned somber. “December ‘41, while Shelbyville was stringing Christmas lights and cutting Fraser firs, Roosevelt declared war.”

Jill flinched as if war had just been announced in the current world, “You were just a boy! You had to go to war?”

John flashed a mischievous smile and laughed, “It wasn’t *quite* like you’d expect. You see, unlike my buddy Lucky, I’ve had waves of extremely good luck –like meeting my Holly. For every instance of bad luck for Lucky, something great would happen to me. For example, Lucky failed a final exam by one question the week before graduation and was held back through summer school. He couldn’t even stand for his class photo. On that same week, I graduated basic training as an Army Private, when the only talent I had paid off.”

As John continued, he could clearly envision his younger self, standing outside of a sweltering Georgia barracks in hundred-degree heat.

John’s sergeant found him a job as a painter. However, John quickly learned it wasn’t as an artist painting on canvas or murals of beautiful models. He had to paint the words “Mess Hall” by hand using masking tape. It was like giving a racecar driver the keys to a bus. But John knew there were worse jobs during war-time.

John squinted as sweat stung his eyes, painting in long, slow strokes. His head was tilted in a daydream. As his dreams drifted from home, to Trinidad, to Holly, a thunderous voice made him jump.

“Private Gable!” Sergeant Simpson shouted three inches from John’s ear. Though Simpson was the no-nonsense shouting sort, he was not the cliché hard-ass. He liked John and would kid him like a little brother. John never made trouble and the other men admired him, though he was younger. Successful teams needed more of his go-with-the-flow kind. Simpson also loved jolting John out of his endless daydreams.

“Yes sir!” John stood at attention, paint splattered across his face.

Sergeant Simpson began with mock anger, “The men say you drew these pictures for them; fact or fiction?” Simpson held

up several pencil sketches. Some were classic architectural renderings of Fort Benning –buildings observed by John such as the stone entrance gate surrounded by moss-covered trees. The other pictures were, of course, pin-up style drawings of a smiling, curvy, patriotic blonde. Residents of Shelbyville would have found the girl's face familiar. "Yes sir. I'm sorry, sir." John remained at solid attention.

Simpson leaned in, maintaining his tone, "What the hell are you sorry about? With your talent, it's a disservice to America that you're painting the sides of mess halls. Someone wants to meet you."

John tried to not let his face reflect *oh crap*. Was the sergeant angry at the drawings? Had the General seen them? Were the pin-ups inappropriate? *Does he want me to draw him his own girl?*

Sergeant Simpson escorted the clammy and spattered John through the headquarter's maze of halls and doors. The rooms had rows of government-issued desks and the first air conditioning John had ever seen –a Philco-York window unit that plugged right into the wall. In a spare back office sat a tanned, buzz-cut commander with his boots propped on the desk. John halted in front of the desk and swallowed. Simpson dropped the handful of sketches on the desk in front of the square-jawed commander. Sergeant Simpson, John's closest thing to an ally, about-faced and exited the room. John was alone in front of a large, nameless officer.

"At ease private. Have a seat. I'm Company Commander Chance with the 20th Engineer Regiment," His words made no indication if this was a good thing or bad.

John sat without breaking eye contact with the man.

"Want a cigar, kid?" Chance spat out the tip and lit the end of a Cuban Cohiba.

"No, sir. I don't smoke, SIR!" John shouted as if he were responding to a drill sergeant.

Chance exhaled a puff, "Relax, it wasn't an order."

John's shoulders eased. "I've never really been a smoker, sir..." John didn't know where else to go with the conversation.

Commander Chance sat up straight and cleared his throat. "Have you put any thought into your future or do you want to daydream about your girlfriend back home while painting walls all day?"

"Uh...yes sir. I mean no, sir." John was confused by his own answer. Who was this guy? *Do all soldiers daydream of girls or does Chance know something about me?*

The Commander plowed through to his point. "I'm with the Engineer Regiment. My Army Engineers provide support to troops, such as securing land and the construction of new facilities. An important part of our job is to illustrate plans with our architects. Sergeant Simpson's shown me your work. Impressive. I especially liked the..." Chance leafed through the pencil-drawn sketches. "...architectural drawings of the Fort." He smiled pensively. "My father helped build Fort Benning in 1918 with his bare hands. If he were alive, he'd think your drawings were beautiful." Chance looked at John. "I'd like you to be part of my regiment and work with my architects."

John was unsure how to reply. As miserable as Fort Benning was, it had become a sort of surrogate home. Chance was not clear about *what* an Army Engineer was, but John knew he couldn't be a private forever. *-And this might actually have something to do with drawing..?* "Sir, where would this job be located?"

"Fort Bell," Chance leaned back in his chair. "We ship out tomorrow."

"A ship?" John asked. "Where is Fort Bell?"

"Bermuda."

"Bermuda..? John stammered, "The...one in the ocean?"

"It sure ain't Bermuda, Texas."

John's eyes grew as wide as coconuts.