Elegy For Tommy

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Abstract

They handed him the letter and he began to read it, his legs dangling over the edge of the upper bunk...
life—until tomorrow, that is. Then you anoint your head with olive oil, add a shower cap, and throw yourself into a fitful sleep. . . . You are Marie Antoinette wearing long white curls. The butcher at the corner grocery is chasing after you with a cleaver. You trip because you never did get around to shortening those blue jeans, and he cuts off your head. You watch objectively as it rolls down the hill and then wake up screaming. Shaking with relief you suddenly remember with a jolt your own fate, and deciding Marie A. wasn't so bad off after all, knock yourself out on the bedpost and watch your white-haired head topple off the cliff into Lake Erie.

Elegy For Tommy
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THEY handed him the letter and he began to read it, his legs dangling over the edge of the upper bunk. He had to bend forward to fit the curve of the Nissen hut, and the light from the bulb with the newspaper shade was poor for reading but it didn't really matter. He knew what the letter would say.

"Dear Mrs. Tompkins," in the eighth-grade handwriting of the team's construction sergeant, "We know how hard the news of Tommy's death will hit you and we wouldn't of wrote this letter only we wanted you to know how we all felt about Tommy in this outfit."

All but one, he thought.

"We all called him Tommy on account of his real first name was too much of a mouthful to handle all the time. And that just goes to show you we all thought a lot of your husband, Mrs. Tompkins, and us fellows talked it over and decided you might like to hear how he unfortunately met his end.

"Well, we moved up here after we finished the job at Ballan-
trae but we had to make a couple trips with the trucks and there was still one truckload left after the second trip but we didn't need it bad so a couple days later Whit was going to go down and pick up the stuff and our mail and one of the boys had some laundry down there so-------"

_The team sergeant came over and tapped him on the shoulder._

_"Tommy's goin' down to Ballantrae with Whit, so you don't have to go."_

_"Wait a minute, Staff, I wanted to pick up my laundry."_

_"That's ok, Tommy'll get it for you. What laundry is it in?"_

_"Crown and Thistle. Will they give it to him?"

_"Sure."

_"Why's Tommy going? Why can't I go?"

_"Tommy wants to see his woman in Girvan on the way back."

_"Why can't he go see his woman in Ayr instead and let me go to Ballantrae?"

_"Don't gimme any back-talk! Tommy's goin' and that's that."

_"When they starting?"

_"They just left. You'll have to dig that hole bigger if you expect to get a pole in it. And leave room for tamping."

There was an argument going on underneath the electric light where Staff and Hart were sorting and folding Tommy's possessions and stuffing them into a green canvas duffle bag.

_"Sure we should!"

_"Yeah, but it's against Army Regulations!"

_"To hell with A. R. Those letters are from Tommy's woman in Girvan."

_"And here's some from that shack-up in London."

_"If his wife ever got ahold of these——"_

_"Ok, ok, it's no skin off me. You're the doctor, Staff. I'm just tellin' you——"

_"Throw 'em in the stove, Hart. Quick, while the Lieutenant's still outside talkin' to the Major."

The iron door clanged and the little stove muttered as the flames curled and browed the pages.

_"Darling—Dearest—when the war's over—that last night
before I left your apartment—pass to London next week—"

Then they were smoke. The rumble died and the little stove settled down to its usual crackle of coke.

He jumped down from the bunk and sat on the bench with his back toward the glowing stove. It felt good. The ridges of the curved roof had left his back very chilly. The light was better for reading too.

"They had a lot of stuff to load all of it heavy and they didn't get started back from Ballantrae till pretty late——"

"Sergeant," said the lieutenant, "where are those two men you sent down to Ballantrae to pick up the polejacks and wire?"

"I don't know, sir," replied Staff. "They went down just after noon. They oughta be back by now. Maybe they had trouble loading."

"Sergeant, there were two polejacks and four coils of wire for that load. Two cripples could load them in half an hour. It's a two-hour drive to Ballantrae and two hours back. You said they left at noon. It's ten o'clock now."

"Yes, sir."

"I want to see those men when they get back. I don't mind them taking their time and stopping off at the bar in Girvan, but I don't like to have any trucks on the road on a wet night like this. It's too dangerous."

"Tommy and Whit are both good drivers, sir. They'll take it easy on a winding road like that at night."

"I hope so, Sergeant."

"Tommy was always a careful driver but it had been raining and that road along the ocean is awful slippery when it's wet and what with the big load they had on and all, well, I guess there wasn't anybody who could of driven that road on a dark night like that and wet and all as it was. Those steep curves are awful tricky even in daytime when it's dry——"

"What a peach of a stretch of road," he shouted into the back seat of the jeep.

"Sure is," agreed Staff. "Look, you can see Craigie Head from here."

"Sure is a relief to get back from the edge of that cliff. Driving with a wall on one side and the ocean on the other makes me nervous."
"Le's have some speed out of this old bus," laughed Staff. "The road's straight and there's no traffic. Let's see what she'll do."

"Sure is desolate up here. Nothing but rocks and heather and wind."

"Only one tree in the whole place," remarked Staff. "That big oak down there aways."

"That's a rock-pine," he scoffed. "That's a oak, ya dumbell."

"Like I said, Tommy was stone-cold sober, but on those curves I guess he just couldn't hold that ton and a half truck on the road, it was so slippery, and they skidded off the road and ran into a big tree growing alongside of the road. A oak tree it was, and I guess Tommy never knew what hit him even though they were only doing——"

"He never knew what hit him!" she laughed, showing her crooked teeth. "One minute he was standing at the bar, drinkin' like anybody and the next thing, the whiskey hit him and he was sittin' on the floor with the most surprised look! Oh, it was smashing! The funniest thing since——"

"Shut up!" he hissed at her. "I came to tell you. Tommy's dead."

"He is?" she said. "Too bad. He was quite a guy."

He felt someone tugging at his shoulder. "Do you want anything of Tommy's to remember him by?"

"What?"

"Hart wanted his knife. I took his pen. The other fellows wanted some of his stuff for a keepsake. We're sendin' his wallet and pictures—most of 'em—and stuff like that home to his wife. We didn't figure she'd care about the small stuff. Do you want anything?"

"No," he whispered. "No, no!"

They looked at him with a peculiar sort of tenderness. The kid was sure taking Tommy's passing hard. Well, he was only twenty.

There was a mouse speaking between the steel shells of the hut, he noticed. It was rustling along like a dry leaf. What did he
want up there, he wondered. Food, or love, or just to squeak
and rustle? The wind sucked gustily at the chimney. He turned
back to the letter. There was not much more.

“He wasn’t hurt bad. He just looked like he was asleep, he
was so peaceful. It all come all of a sudden. Afterwards when
we put his new uniform on him he just laid there looking like
a soldier every inch and about ready to get up and——”

He looked at the laundry bag, stiff with the drying blood.
God, he thought, why did they have to use it for a pillow? He
was dead already. He pulled out some of the contents. There
was blood on his shirts, on everything. Inside the bag it was
still red and runny. He sat looking at the crumpled pile of
clean, filthy clothes.

“Burn it up,” said Staff.

He sat and stared, a little sick, a little resentful, and a little
horrified that he could be resentful.

“Yeah, burn it up,” said Staff.

He shoved the pile into the stove. The red flames licked at
the red blood. He slammed the door shut. There was a smell
of burning feathers. Hart looked odd.

“Must be the wool in the shirts,” someone said. Everybody
nodded.

The door opened suddenly and the wind curled around the
brick partition in front of the door, chilling the room and blow­ing
away the blue tobacco smoke. The lieutenant followed the
wind in.

“About finished, Sergeant?”

“Just about, sir.”

“The major’s gone. I was outside trying to think of what to
say in my letter to Mrs. Tompkins. It’s damn hard to have to
write a letter like this. She’ll be so broken up.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I hate it.”

“We wrote her a letter telling how much we all thought of
him, Lieutenant. All the boys are signing it.”

“I suppose I’ll have to say the usual thing. ‘Your husband was
a brave soldier and a fine man.’ I wish I knew something to say
so she wouldn’t feel so bad.”

Why not tell her what he was really like, he thought. I could
give you some choice items about training camp in the States before we came over. Don’t tell her what she lost; tell her what she got rid of.

“Let me see that letter, will you, when you’re through with it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“----so we’re taking him down to Cheltenham tomorrow. It’s a beautiful place. Green grass and lots of trees, and white crosses. He’ll lie between his comrades in arms in honored glory.

“We all thought lots of Tommy. He was just like a brother to us. Always smiling. Always had a joke. He was a swell fella. And we want you to know that we all believe that wherever Tommy is now, he’s still smiling. We all loved him.”

All except one, he thought. Wonder if you wouldn’t feel better if you really knew? Why don’t I----wouldn’t believe it anyway, I guess.

“----and so we can’t say much except we’re awful sorry Tommy’s dead and we wish we could do something to help you out. If there’s anything you need, be sure and let us know. We’re always ready to help out Tommy’s widow. Yours very sincerely,”

Click! The snap went on the duffle bag and the lieutenant strung a piece of wire through the grommets and joined its ends with a little leaden seal. There was all that was left of Tommy, signed, sealed, and ready for delivery.

“Ain’t ya finished with that letter yet?”

“Yeah, I just finished it.”

“Have ya signed it?”

“Not yet, Staff.”

“Well, sign it and let’s have it.”

“I———”

“Ain’tcha gonna sign it?”

“I———yeah, sure.”

He scribbled his name at the bottom of the sheet after all the other names and shoved the paper across the table to Staff. The lieutenant left, taking Tommy’s duffle bag. Staff folded the letter, slid it into an envelope and propped it against the ashtray.

“Remind me to mail that in the morning.”

The group under the light broke up. Someone stoked the stove. He climbed back into his top bunk, up next the cold roof and the squeaking mouse.