the landings

Omar Haboubi

june 6 1944

(wilde sifalo, age 17)

omaha

I saw a helmet explode. And in it a head.

Luck had squeezed us past the mortar rounds. Less fortunate boats were hit, went up in flames, all the bodies aboard ablaze. A chilling saturation of sound and sight. Mr. Godsend seemed to agree. He clicked his camera, sent those boys off into frozen history. At the deathly slow pace of a trotting horse, five of our boats made it past the bombs hailing down from as far as three miles out. I was wondering what my death, clearly looming, would feel like, and if we all felt it the same, when the sergeant slapped the philosophy out of me:

"Never mind the mortars. You keep him safe," he screamed, above the din and death, his muscled finger jabbing into the midriff of the terrified Mr. Godsend. "He will not die. And if he dies, which he will not, you are *ordered* not to die. For you will take his camera. And you will document this victory. And the devil as we cave in their heads."

Pressed for breath and time, Mr. Godsend stuttered and stammered through a hasty tutorial. Not that I'd need to know. For the sergeant said he wouldn't die.

And when he *did* die, only minutes after the ramp went down and we leapt out, I became concerned. I looked for the sergeant. And he looked at me. As he floated in his pool of blood. Taking the camera from around Mr. Godsend's neck, I photographed them first.

We were a few hundred yards from shore, and chest deep in water. Most made the mistake of applying our basic training: *move forward as a team. You are not an individual, but part of a unit*. And as a unit, as part of a team, they were mowed down. Those that escaped the bullets, couldn't escape the tides that filled their clothes and packs and sucked them under. "You are ordered to undress," screamed whoever was now in charge. So we removed our shoes, pants, assault jackets, and the like. That made it easier to move forward but not harder to find, and more of our boys were deleted.

A reasonable patriot, but no zealot, I decided to hold back. Clutching the side of our boat for cover, and much lighter now, and with the water only chest high, I took whatever photos I could of the brave as

they progressed doggedly forward. But they were still too slow, their remaining clothes filling with water—no man wants to be *completely* naked in a crisis. And for the devil up top, firing from safety, I suspect it was like fairground shooting. I wondered if they had such things in Nazi Land. Only five of our thirty reached the sand. Two of them made the mistake of collapsing with exhaustion. Then they were gone. One by the tide, another by the sweeping machine gun fire that appeared to be coming from opposite sides before meeting elegantly in the middle. I hung and hid for as long as I could, until eventually, exhausted by fear, I went for it. But the bastards saw, and bullets raked the water hitting everywhere but me. Hallelujah. Ashore, I crawled across sand to the foot of the bluff, then to a narrow sanctuary. I rested there all day, totally spent, half-naked, unarmed.

And I thought about strange things. Does a bullet have a soul, I wondered, a mind of its own? When firing into the flesh of a man: has it been forced to, is it indifferent, or has it been so indoctrinated as to relish the self-sacrifice necessary for the tearing in and pouring out? If you've been to war, you might concede the question, while outlandish, is not without merit: guns misfire with regularity, miss even more. Is this a choice the bullet makes?

When it got dark, I made my way to a cove where I lucked into a company of Rangers. They didn't look like the boys from boot. These were thirsty blood-drinkers, real death-dancers: the type Sergeant Major, save his soul, would've drank with. I explained my assignment, took my photos. I was handed a Browning automatic rifle and together we moved upwards, destroying enemy entrenchments. "Make sure you take a photo of Jerry. Show 'em what Rangers do." So, I did . . ..

poster child for the 'integrity of truth initiative'

(not propaganda)

Six weeks later I received the order:

"They want you back home, Sifalo," said my new sergeant major. This one was less shouty, leaned less on the Bible. Although both, it turned out, were avid nasal excavators. And extreme fans of the United States Armed Forces.

"Oh, right," I said, as I swerved a booger missile. "Any reason?"

"Ours is not to reason why—"

"Ours is but to do or die. Got it. Still, anything I should know about?"

"Those photographs you took at Omaha. They're going to be in *Life Magazine*. They want an interview. To provide proper context. Otherwise it might look like a poorly planned, bungled operation resulting in thousands of unnecessary deaths. Which, of course, it was not."

"Which it was not?"

"Which it was not. Not at all. Not in any way. Not according to your interview."

"Ah," I said, "propa—ganda."

"Hitler uses propaganda. We use the integrity of truth."

"Right. Yes. Of course."

"You'll be given a script. Read it. Memorize it. Don't deviate from it. This is important work you've been tasked with. You may meet important people."

"Got it, Sergeant Major."

"Dismissed."

I about-faced, leaving him to his nasal rummagings.

Needless to say, I was thrilled to be returning State Side. My brief tussle with the Germans had worked out quite nicely. The designation of war hero was imminent. And already I was someone important, or of some importance, I forget the sergeant major's exact wording. There was to be an awards ceremony,

scheduled for after my interview with *Life*. The sergeant major stressed the word *after*, making clear the trade-off: Remember, Son—stay on script. Yes, Sergeant Major. Over and out.

The flight home had no magazines or reclining chairs, no sterling silver cutlery or carved meats, not a single beautiful woman bending into me, enquiring if I was ready for another. Besides the pilot and co-pilot, I was the only fully functional person on the ride back. The corpses were bagged and piled into the base of the plane; up top, with me, the rest were alive but missing body parts. A man with one leg and one opposite arm spent the entire ride staring at me. There was nothing to do but pretend to sleep.

An odd-looking fat and wheezing man, with sinister spectacles and eyes too close together, met me at the gate.

"My name is Thom Shrewsbury," he said, ignoring my extended hand. "Mr. Godsend was a friend of mine. People at *Life* liked him. It should be him, you know, doing this. This isn't right."

"My name is Wilde Sifalo," I replied. "And it's war. There's nothing right about it."

"Good God. You won't be saying that in the interview, will you?"

"Dear Lord, no," I replied. "I have an awards ceremony. And I don't intend to miss it."

I got the impression, from Shrewsbury's opening salvo and several cutting remarks that followed, that he strongly suspected I'd thrown Mr. Godsend in front of a bullet meant for me. Yes, Shrewsbury didn't like me, not very much, not at all.

Like the cab ride, the building that housed *Life* was long and tense and dull.

"It's quite a thing, isn't it?" beamed Shrewsbury, as we pulled up. "We are all proud custodians."

"There's no shame in that."

"We don't do humor at *Life*, Sifalo. You best remember that when you meet Mr. Luce."

"Roger that. Is he conducting the interview?"

Shrewsbury got a kick out of that one—in a smirky kind of way. “Heavens, no. That’s like asking Thomas Edison to change a lightbulb.”

“It’s beneath him. Got it.”

“*Everything* is beneath Mr. Luce. His office is the top floor. Mr. Luce is God.”

“I’ve never met God. How exciting.”

“Don’t be glib,” said Shrewsbury, as he manhandled me into the building. “We’re still in mourning.”

Mr. Luce was waiting as the lift doors opened. I detected a thin smile below warm, bright eyes—signs, I wondered, of appreciation? Perhaps Shrewsbury was an outlier, the lone wolf who didn’t recognize my part in the war effort. Perhaps he and Godsend had been lovers.

“It’s quite a thing you’ve done, my boy.”

“I’ll admit it’s impressive,” I said, shaking his extended hand.

“You captured the war, what war is. Yes, we know the war is on, but to feel it, to hold the blood in your hands. That’s the power of pictures . . .”

Well, it was a shorter meeting than anticipated. Mr. Luce’s driver said as much as he shuttled me off.

“And he was so looking forward to meeting you.”

“Was he?” I said, as I scratched at a nasty rash, newly announced. “I didn’t get that impression.”

“He soured on you quite quickly. Yes sir, you made lemons from lemonade in double time.”

Was this rash an infection? Was it, heaven forbid, a death-touch from one of the corpses?

“Do you suppose the interview is off?” I asked.

The driver enjoyed that one. “My God, no,” he replied. “Mr. Luce has never let his personal loathing for someone detract from an important story.”

“Loathe, you say?”

red bill, death threats, and freedom philosophy

Besides an exponential itching, I was delirious with sleep deprivation, dizzy from the swirl of New York with its soot and sweat that the tallness of everything seemed to encase. A hero's welcome had quickly soured into implications of murder, general abhorrence, and a concerning skin infection.

"Who am I seeing now?" I asked, as we pulled up. "Only I've not slept since Normandy."

"You're off to see Red Bill."

"Is there anything I should know about him?"

"Yes. Don't look him in the eyes."

"Why not?"

"He lost one of them in the last war. He has a glass replacement, but it rolls around."

Another elevator, another man waiting.

"I'd like to offer you—you're not recording this meeting, are you?"

"What? No."

"We'll see," said the general, who proceeded to pat me down. "You can never be too careful. Even the walls have eyes."

That reminded me to look away.

"I'd like to offer you, unofficially, of course, my apologies for Normandy. Dwight is a nit, which is dangerous, of course, because when we win this war, and we *will* win, he'll likely be elected President, God help us. Look at me when I'm talking to you."

I took a chance on the left eye and was relieved to find it staring back.

"They had the high ground and the tide. What did he *think* was going to happen?"

"General—"

"Call me Red."

"Red, I haven't slept since Normandy."

“I was a tunnel rat in the first war. Don’t talk to *me* about deprivation. How old are you, Boy?”

“Seventeen.”

“Then you’ve long been a man. Never complain to anyone who isn’t your wife. It reveals your weaknesses. Protect your fortress and your flank. It’s a nasty business, living. Just grin and keep your mouth shut.”

Perhaps the general had a point.

“Do you know why you’re here?”

“As a part of the Integrity of Truth initiative.”

“Propaganda. That wily painter is doing very well boiling his water—whereas, so far, ours has been rather tepid. We need something to inspire. Like it or not, you’re it: America’s flame.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I like you, Kiddo. Luce called, said you were raving mad. But Luce is a hack, a prostitute at the side of a dirty road, a spin-doctor with an unclean scalpel. You’re his worst nightmare—a freethinker. Fortunately for us, no one wants to know what *really* happened at Omaha. War is too terrifying. So you’ll play a part, and for that you won’t be sent back on some orchestrated suicide mission. And when it’s all done, and Hitler dead, come and see me and we’ll talk some more.”

“I’m not entirely relaxed about deceiving my America.”

“Good God, we would never let you do that.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You just have to tell the whole truth, as we explain it to you.”

“But wouldn’t it be even more truthful to just answer whatever questions are asked . . . honestly?”

“You have two options. You can tell the whole truth, or you can answer honestly.”

“I think I understand.”

The general patted my head.

“Be a hero, Son. Be all you can be.”

“And what can I be, sir?”

"Alive."

"Ok, Red. I think I understand."

The general handed me a drink.

"The photos you took created quite a stir. We wanted to publish right away, of course. But Roosevelt wasn't keen—too much reality. Truman talked him round. He said this was a perfect opportunity to frame the war. Which, of course, it was. The only issue were the photos. You seemed, he said, to fixate over our casualties. It would have been better, he said, to capture the Germans running scared. He was quite angry at you for that, was Roosevelt."

"Roosevelt was angry at *me*?"

"Enraged. He asked the Supreme Court if you could be tried for treason. Wondered whether your photos could constitute a deliberate attempt to create draft dodgers and weaken the war effort. He called you a Hitler hugger. He wanted you tried and hung as an agent of The Third Reich."

I drank the drink, drank it all, extended my hand for another, drank that. This seemed to please Red Bill.

"Anyway," he continued, "the Supreme Court debated. And you are narrowly not a Nazi. But it was touch and go for a while. Also, FDR would prefer you *not* to be seventeen for the sake of the story. So you've been issued new identification papers etc. Congratulations, you're now eighteen. Let's drink to that."

"Red," I said, weakly, "I'm feeling rather fragile. It seems the President's attempt on my life has taken a lot out of me. Perhaps it's best the interview is conducted without my presence."

Well, the general didn't like that idea. I could tell because of the crashing floorboards, flung objects, and mouth foam. I was, however, too tired to be horrified by his disintegration, performative or real, so, after a period of petting-zoo type observation, I ducked off to pour myself another drink. "That makes no sense," said the general, finally. "Luce warned me you'd make no sense." He lit a cigar and contemplated. "But we can't have someone nonsensical doing interviews. That's settled then. You've gotten what you want. Only, if anyone asks, this was my idea. A lot of people want you deleted. We need to tread carefully."

I sat in the shower, fully clothed. A flick of the wrist and the pipes screamed. The coldest water had ever been bearhugged me into a nice numbness. They had good pressure at The Carlyle. I directed it at the rash. It appeared to be spreading.

At some point I thought of leaving through the window. Or perhaps, I thought, a meal first? I leaned out and grabbed the phone—oh, yes, you could reach out from anywhere at The Carlyle.

"What do I want? I don't know . . .. No, I haven't seen the menu . . .. Well, I can't really move right now. Just bring me up whatever you would have if it were your last meal . . .. No, I have no allergies . . .. Something to drink? What's the most expensive thing you have? . . . No, I'm not familiar with wine . . .. Do you have scotch? . . . Oh, good . . .. Yes, whatever is most expensive . . .. A bottle. And leave it outside my door. Oh, and a bathrobe if you have one . . .. Uncle Sam."

They hid everything under a silver shell, I guess for mystique purposes. I couldn't make out what any of it was, but it looked important and tasted special, as did the scotch. Drinking about half of it, it occurred to me that life would be pretty good if you could drink *this* every day, live permanently in *this* suite. I was searching for a way to make that happen, when a telegram forced its way into my room:

> Medal ceremony postponed for the sake of National Security. We, America, thank you for your service. When the write-up and adjoining photos appear in *Life* tomorrow, I think you'll find you've been represented with full accuracy as the quintessential American Hero, an honor that will carry itself over and around you 'til the day you die – something that, given the circumstances, will not occur any time soon, not at the hands of the enemy anyway. Roosevelt was very pleased with the final product. He called you a true patriot. May you always serve the best interests of your country. God Bless America.
> Yours with gravitas
> Wild Bill
> P.S. Five hundred dollars for the photos
> are at the front desk.
> P.P.S Swing by, say tomorrow evening at seven.
> We need to chat.

“We are delighted with the imminent publication,” said a beaming Bill upon my arrival. He swayed merrily with booze as he handed me a glass.

I bowed theatrically. “I am thrilled we are delighted.”

“Luce said you had a heavy foot with the dry and droll. Dangerous business that, a loose tongue.”

“I apologize, General. I always suspect it’s a bad idea, yet it comes out anyway. I can only imagine it’s a tic.”

Bill waved me off. “Would you like to read your thoughts?” Bill delighted in the absurdity. And when he laughed, his right eye rolled—to the left, to the right, up then down, before settling back to front. “Here,” he said, handing me some papers. And another drink, of course. “Actually, my boy, in the end we decided your thoughts weren’t necessary. We mention you, of course, but no interview. Don’t worry, you’re still the hero. There will definitely be an awards ceremony.”

The Normandy Landings, Omaha Beach, day 1. Don’t look away. This is what freedom looks like. Freedom is not an ideology. It cannot be secured on podiums, in rousing speeches, through academic papers typed, or whispered dinner table talk. Freedom is an action word. Boys, barely men if that, came in boats to the beaches of Normandy. Met by mortars and machine gun fire, when the ramps went down they did not hesitate, but plunged into enemy waters and watched as their countrymen ahead died for the cause of good. But they did not falter. For freedom cannot afford to hesitate. Instead they moved forward until those lucky enough to reach the shores—those lucky few, that did not die by mortar, or bullet, or drowning—were target practice for those cowards who hid up high firing down and across the sands. And still our boys came. They moved forwards through red waters and up bloody beaches, knowing that they themselves were unlikely to survive, sacrificing their bodies to a higher purpose—the survival of the human race, in this fight of all fights of Good versus Evil. These photos were meant to be taken by Mr. Godsend,

photographer here at *Life*, but he died with only one shot taken, the first here (top left) of a full raft of thirty men aboard his boat before the ramps went down and they jumped out. Mr. Godsend was killed almost immediately. It was left to eighteen year old Mr. Wilde Sifalo of Short Horn, West Virginia (top right) to take the camera from around Mr. Godsend's neck and, while under heavy fire, document the sacrifice, the bravery of our boys. Let these photos serve, not to frighten you, but to show the true nature of courage, of putting others before ourselves, of being true American heroes. For without this fighting spirit, mark my words, there can be no America. We are at war with a madness that comes to destroy us all, extinguish our way of life, stamp out our freedoms. Let these photos be a call to arms. A reminder of what we are fighting, and what we are fighting for. God bless America.

The general's good eye burrowed into me. "Well, what do you think?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," I said. "Very patriotic."

"The photos *without* the words would have been a disaster. What does that tell you?"

"That if you tell people well enough how to look at something they will."

"Very good. There is no winning a war without words. Words inspire. Photos cannot inspire. They are what they are. Man bludgeons beast, the camera clicks, a negative is developed, and that's it—you hold in your hand the thing that happened in that fraction of time, no wiggle room, no debate, no context to create. They are too accurate on their own; their objectivity becomes the death of inspiration for the purposes at hand. But if man bludgeons beast, the right words, correctly put, can convince you that what you're seeing is not actually what happened; that boys weren't sent on a suicide mission in those first waves at Omaha . . .. I believe that war is a blood-lust. You can con most men into going once, but once they've seen, nevermore, not for the sane. You give your life to your country, even as the most complete patriot, as long as some part of that is theoretical: you see yourself going, but more importantly coming

back, the hero, forever to others and more so to yourself. That's what they're fighting for: it's a personal mission of manliness more than the semi-obscure idea of German invasion."

"You think it'll do some good then, the article?"

"You're asking if you made a difference to the war effort; you want to go home the hero, you really want to believe that."

"Yes."

"I believe it could. Yes, I believe it could. And you *were* brave. Taking those photos."

It was all quite a lot, this depth of conversation. "I think I went mad," I said, as I felt the water rise. Could brutal honesty kill you, I wondered. "I broke from reality. If I took photos then it wasn't really happening; well, it was happening, but not to me; I was just there to observe and record."

"So, is bravery the action in adversity, or the consciousness under fire?"

"I guess that's what I'm wondering."

"If you weren't really there, did you suffer enough for gallantry? Are coping mechanisms a hiding place, a dark corner, a cowering? Son, you are not responsible for what goes on inside. We are a drink of luck; our cocktails of dissimilar natures and nurtures determine how we meet all events, minor and major, so there is neither bravery nor cowardice, only a predetermined outcome that the world refuses to believe is set in stone—for we must all, it says, take responsibility." The general sighed deeply. "Son, the greatest lie is what is possible for one is possible for all. And we tell it because hope is necessary for the trudging, and without the idea of self-determination, well, we'd all just as well kill ourselves or each other. For good deeds and bad, we would bear no responsibility—a reality far more frightening than Hitler. So knowing you are not free, not in a deeper sense, do you give up on the concept altogether, or within those limitations I've explained, find a freedom of sorts?"

"What do you mean?"

"A man has responsibilities, a wife, children, job, a code of laws under the social contract. And he is bound by them. But only if he willingly submits. Those are choices he makes, for fear of consequence, real or imagined. What I mean is: the more society evolves, the less freedom we have. We call this progress.

The freest we ever were we lived in caves. We were meat hunting meat. But our lives, short-lived and bloody, were at least in a truer sense our own."

home

Red had sprained my head, unaccustomed as it was to heavy lifting.

And the train, coughing and rumbling and threatening to break down, drove me forward.

There were lots of glances. A few people approached, asked to shake my hand. Even signed my name across several copies of *Life*.

"Will you be going back?"

"You bet your ass I will, ma'am. Just as soon as I'm given new orders."

Chugging into Short Horn Station—for all coal towns, no matter how small, had by design train tracks running through them—I was met by a large contingent of familiar townsfolk. Short Horn had neither the constant sun nor perpetual rain to explain our frowns, yet we had them all the same: the working man's birthright. So these congenial faces alarmed me. Someone had even made a sign: *You've put Short Horn on the map*.

As I disembarked, I was submerged by arms that rattled me in gratitude.

"You've put Short Horn on the map," said one old fellow, in case, I suppose, I hadn't seen the sign.

Girls wore tight clothing.

And pushing past them all was Margarite. Oh dear, dear Margarite . . ..

I should probably, at this point, as you know very little about me, divulge some personal history—although that is not my way, not at all, not one bit.

I suppose, to be more accurate, I ought to have left you with a few salient details back at Omaha, when my expiration looked all but certain. Just a few facts to remember me by, so you'd know I was real, actual flesh and bone. But where was the time? Not on the boat, as the sergeant screamed bravery into us. Not in the water: too much blood, too loud the fire of guns. The bluff? Now, I had time there. But it's easy in retrospect, is it not, this life?

Well you already know my name, my real age, where I live . . ..

My parents, from a line of milkers, were milkers too. All day on the teat. For such work you need strong hand DNA, the good grip gene, as well as rhythm and posture. We moved around the Dairy States. Idaho and Texas, Wisconsin and California. Until finally Ma said we needed to settle down. "Besides," she said, "my hands aren't what they were."

There was always mining work in West Virginia, and we arrived in Short Horn just shy of my fifteenth birthday.

I had honed my football in Texas, where perhaps the food made everyone bigger, defenses tougher. Within four months of our arrival I was the high school quarterback. The coach liked to play a running game and with my ankle-breakers he fell plumb in love with me. So when my parents got itchy feet and readied to leave for fishing trawlers out in Delaware, he offered to take me in. "Just until you get back," he reasoned. "He simply can't leave now. We've a real chance at State." We got to the finals that year and lost. The next year we won. And still no word from Ma and Pa. But living with Coach was okay. He allowed me to have Margarite over, except the night before games because he said it weakened the legs.

I had been happily seeing Margarite for about a year and a half when for no good reason she decided to break me into pieces. "Your best years are behind you," she said. "While I'm in my prime and have designs on life." I thought that meant she would go travelling, *out of sight, out of mind* and all that. Instead, quite cruelly, she shacked up with the richest man in town, pocket-faced and more than double her in age. Two months later they were lavishly engaged. Thankfully, America had already entered the war so I was able to remove myself in heroic fashion.

“Oh, Wilde,” she said now, in the way she used to say it. “My handsome, brave warrior. Oh, I’ve missed you so.”

“Hello, Margarite,” I replied. My arms pinned to my sides, she juiced the air from my blood. “Can’t . . . breathe . . . please . . ..”

“Why didn’t you write?” she asked, reproachfully, as she uncoiled herself. “I know the Germans wouldn’t have posted your letters, but surely from Basic Training . . .?”

“Here—we made you a cake,” said another girl, shouldering past Margarite.

Chants of “cut the cake,” as I was pushed through the crowd into the middle of the rabble. And with a large knife I cut into Hitler’s head.

“Slice his throat.”

So I did, semi-expecting blood to spill out. Which it did.

“Pretty clever, huh. It’s raspberry sauce.”

“Did you see him?

“No, Adolf would’ve been too cowardly to face our boy.”

Heavy with rum, we sang *God bless Virginia* (to the tune of *God bless America*), and hailed our state until the liquor ran out. “Speech, speech!” And the crowd hushed.

“I see so many fine Virginians before me. But while we have him on the run, let us not take our foot off his neck. Now is not a time for celebration, although I am touched by the sentiment. I see the sign that says I have put Short Horn on the map.” The crowd cheered, but I raised my hands for quiet. “But this isn’t true. We are a coalmining town, and in no time in history have we ever been as important as right now. Without coal there is no steel, no iron, no war won. Each of you that goes down into the black each day is the highest patriot and the savior of this country. Now remember that. Be proud. God Bless these most United of States. And God Bless Short Horn.” A Churchillian speech, an eruption to match, and I was hoisted into the air.

When the crowd eventually scattered only Margarite stood before me.

“We’ll live on lots of land and we’ll have sex on every inch of it and we’ll have children and they’ll grow up to be American heroes just like their father and I’ll open up a sandwich shop because you know how much I like baking breads and hams and we’ll call it something catchy and patriotic like I don’t know maybe Hero’s Heroes and you can get fat because you deserve to and I can stay nice and thin the way you like and—"

“Breathe, Margarite. You’ve gone violet for lack of air.”

“*You* are my oxygen, my sweet.”

“That’s all very nice, Margarite.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

“But I don’t see us being together.”

“Why, Wilde? Why would you say such hurtful words?”

“Because before I went off you said: ‘I don’t see us being together.’”

“Oh, but I was young and foolish and didn’t understand the depths of you. Since you left I’ve been in constant mourning. Ask anyone if I’ve worn any color but black.”

“You got engaged to Durant Iverson a week before I left.”

“The hasty reaction of a heartbroken child.”

“You said that you’d really given it a lot of thought. And he was a voracious and thorough lover.”

“Words, just words, my angel. What I’m offering you now is the real stuff. Actions. You’ll see.”

She took my hand. And I think because of the booze and the love and the heartbreak and the anger and the loins and the general fuckedupedness of it all, I allowed myself to be led off.

After a peculiar walk, and saddled with intentions, ill and otherwise, we reached the Thompson spread on the outer edges of town. The Thompsons, who kept largely to themselves, were, save for the chairman of Christian Coal, the aforementioned Durant Iverson, the only substantial landowners in Short Horn. And quick to anger and lead.

“We can’t be here, Margarite,” I said, concerned. “It’s trespassing. And Mr. Thompson is no less likely to fire on me than those Nazis. I doubt he’d see a difference between invaders.”

“That would be a hell of a shot seeing as he’s in San Diego.”

“What’s he doing there?”

“Being rich. San Diego is better on your bones too, no more cold winters. No more Christianity.” Mr. Thompson was a heretic, outcasted as the only vocal non-believer in Short Horn. “Relocation salvation. Amen.” She spread her arms. “It’s all mine now. Engagement gift.”

“Aren’t you going to give it back?” I asked, although purely for ceremonial purposes for I knew Margarite.

“Goodness, no. I was asked to, and I did, of my own volition—once the papers were signed, of course—some very unusual things, knee-trembling vulgarities of the carnal kind, beastly—”

“That’ll be quite enough, thank you.”

“But that’s done with now. As the Germans would say: that’s *kaput*.”

“How did he take the news of your disengagement?” I hoped he’d taken it terribly.

“I hope he’ll take it very badly,” she said, walking off. “That’s the least he could do.”

“So you haven’t actually done it yet?” But she was already too far off to hear me, or knowing Margarite, just pretended to be.

Alone, I walked a little way up the hill, entered the cabin and crawled into bed. I must have slept for two days straight, for in the blink of an eye it was two days gone and, true to her word, she came back single. With two exquisite suitcases of expensive looking clothes. And two black eyes. Well, I saw red, of course I did; for what man hits a woman like that, closed-fisted? I took a knife and made my way to the door, but Margarite, battered, dramatic Margarite, threw herself against it.

“Don’t you dare hurt him, he’s hurting enough. If he’d have just let me go with a grunt or a sigh that would have broken my heart.”

“Okay, Margarite. Okay,” I said, because that did make some sort of twisted sense. And it was a relief to know he was hurting. “So this is really what you want then, just me as I am?”

“I do.”

“I don’t plan on making any money.”

"Well that's good, as I don't plan on spending any."

I spent the tail-end of the war, despite the town's protestations—for they idolized me now—down the mine with the rest of the men, and some of the more robust women too. And each day going down I wondered if today was the day that Iverson had prepared for me an accident. For although true to my word—I never confronted him, nor he me—we both felt aggrieved and short-changed by Margarite's comings and goings.

Those feelings would last forever and, I regret, spill over even further.

After the war I came up from the pits; and with Red Bill's words still lodged in the freedom-yearning part of my brain I vowed *never again*. Nor would I work for any man. Or work at all, if I could help it.

It was six months on from Hitler's defeat . . . and as I tended to our vegetable garden, Margarite—who by then I'd realized, once the lust and distrust had worn off, I adored—brought me some water from the well and a damp cloth.

"You really know how to look after things," she said. "You love to watch them grow."

"I suppose I do."

"Well—adding one more to oversee won't trouble you then. I'm pregnant."

She smiled, but hesitantly; I'd told her all about Red Bill and freedom, and my wanting as little to tie me down as possible—besides her, of course: as one can equally be tied down by loneliness. But because I could tell she wanted a child, but had never admitted as much for fear of losing me, I lied. This child excepted, she had proven, despite my reservations, to want nothing from life but me, and nothing from me but myself. We were, in actual fact, best friends, lovers, larkers, soulmates. We had found, in each other and on this land, everything in the world worthy of a tight grip.

"Oh, that's wonderful news, Margarite."

"Don't worry," she said, "I'll take care of it. You'll be inconvenienced more by those tomatoes. You have my word."

But she didn’t take care of the baby. Not at all. Not one day. For in the middle of next year, the baby came out screaming the sadness of a motherless child.