

Out in the Pacific

“Any word from Johnny, Ma?”

The mother, Dolores, put the spatula down rather forcefully on the counter spraying thick soup broth over the white linoleum countertop.

“For the 30th day in a row, Henry, no. There is still no word from your brother.” She turned around to look at the boy, Henry, that everybody called Hank, and a few people called Hanky -- Like the handkerchiefs people keep in their pockets. She fixed him with a stare that dared him to continue his current line of questioning.

“Do you think he’s okay?” Henry asked, completely oblivious to her frustration.

“Honey he’s stationed somewhere in the Pacific. I don’t think they have trenches there. I’m sure he’s doing fine.” She paused a moment. “...plus if he was sick or dead I’d hope that we’d’ve heard something.”

“You don’t think he’s sick or dead though, do ya ma?” Her absent minded remark exposed her poker face for what it was and worried Henry.

“Would you stop pestering me? You make it worse by asking every darn day about your older brother. Leave it be, boy. When God wants us to know we’ll know.”

“God or the God Damned US Government.” Hank said, crossing his arms and staring at the floor.

“You watch your mouth or i’ll put you in this pot, boy.” She picked up the spatula and started using it as a means to emphasize her point. “You know better than to

take the Lord's name in vain in this house." She said, jabbing the spatula in his direction, flinging soup at Henry.

Henry felt bits of hot soup hit his cheeks and run down his face. He didn't want to wipe the soup off in front of his mother. She took her faith quite seriously and Henry's remark had made her seethe. She was so angry she was trembling. Henry realized if he stayed around much longer he very well may end up in the soup as she had threatened.

He climbed the stairs and went up to his room. He pulled a shoebox out from under his bed and examined the contents. Inside of it was his baseball card collection, twelve dollars, a cigarette he had stolen from his brother before he left, and two letters which his brother had wrote to him. They were the only two letters he had gotten from his brother in the last two years. He had read them over a hundred times each.

June 1944

Hey Hanky,

Feels like it's been forever since I've been home. I sure miss Ma's cooking. Work hard in school, Hanky. The army is not the place to be. I constantly have a bunch of corn fed country peckerwoods telling me what to do all the time, and just earlier this month I got busted back down to private for not cleaning my rifle. All I can tell you is that I'm somewhere in the the pacific. The censor is pretty strict. I don't know why I'm here or what the japs want with sand and coconuts and a bunch of grass huts but I guess that's why I'm a private -- never seeing the bigger picture. All I do is follow orders. I

heard that HSC got itself a camouflage makeover. Quite paranoid if you ask me, do they really think the Axis is going to land up in the redwoods? Work hard Hanky, so you can be your own man and not have to take any Guff from nobody.

I love you, Buddy. I probably won't be able to write again for a while. It makes the time a lot harder thinking of home. I can't wait till I see you and Ma and Pa again. Be good while I'm gone bud. Family's all we got.

John

P.S. What's a cold drink of water taste like? I can't even remember the last time I had me a cold drink of water.

Henry felt like crying. His eyes watered up and his heart hurt. He could feel it rolling over, somewhere down in his stomach. It wasn't necessarily the contents of the letters, as they were somewhat bland, but rather the vision of his brother they invoked. It seemed to generate an emotional response that instantly recalled everything positive about his brother. He decided that was enough of John's letters for one day.

There was a crowd of boys playing kickball at Humboldt State College Elementary School. The elementary school was a part of the local college that Henry's brother John had graduated from many years earlier. The president of the school regularly sent letters and newspapers to all the enlisted men. They were sitting on a bench, waiting to bat, discussing the types of things that young boys discuss. There were five of them, Henry, Brian Vaissade, Don Walkenshaw, Billy Pittman and Isaac

McNulty. They were all in Mr. Bestor's 5th grade class. Brian, Billy and Don were only children, they didn't have any brothers or sisters. The boys had known each other since they were little. Their dads played cards together on Friday night. Except for Isaac, who had changed schools this year, he was from the other side of town.

"My brother's stationed out in Europe somewhere." Isaac said. "He's a sergeant."

"Oh yeah?" said Brian. A brown haired boy with glasses, big ears and freckles.

"Yeah," Isaac Continued "My Pa said he told him that he's told 'im he's killed over a hundred of those nazi kraut sumbitches."

"You don't say." Said Billy. A tall, skinny boy that was knocking on puberty's door early as was evident by the amount of acne he carried with him.

"I do say, though, Zitface." Issac said.

"What you gotta call him Zitface for?" said Don, turning around before he went up to bat. He walloped the ball and made it to third base bringing the runners home.

"I hear they're gonna promote him to officer any day" continued Isaac. "Cuz all of the killing he does."

"Can you stop it?" Said Henry " I don't want to think about the killing. Henry hated thinking about the war. It made him miss his brother and worry about him. It made him start thinking about he things used to be when his older brother would take him everywhere and show him off to the girls, and take him to baseball games and to movies and buy him food. He had never had a friend like his older brother.

"Why? I can't be proud of my brother?" Said Isaac

"No, I just don't want to think about the war." Replied Henry

"Why? Where's your brother at?" Isaac wanted to know.

“Out in the pacific somewhere.” Henry stated, not really having any further information.

“With all the sissies you mean.” Isaac said. “They sent all the real men to Germany and the little girls out to the Islands for a vacation is what my Pa said.”

Wack. Henry hit Isaac before he even processed that he had the intention. Isaac fell off the bench and onto the floor and Henry climbed on top of him hitting him twice more in the nose until he felt a satisfying squish.

“SHUT UP.”

He stood up and started stomping on Henry’s head.

“SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP.”

“Stop it now Henry, come off him, he didn’t mean it.” Said Brian

“”Give it to him Henry, that’ll teach him to run that big mouth of his.” Said Billy Don was still on third.

He was able to deliver two more kicks to the boy's ribs and one to his groin before the PE teacher, Mr Douglas, a fat balding man in short black athletic shorts and a tucked in white collared shirt made it over to pull him off.

Henry was sitting in front of the Principal, Ms. Dorothy Gentry. An older, imposing woman, with dark, gray flecked hair and bright green eyes. She was almost sixty years old. Her desk was pristine. Absolutely nothing was out of place and it was the only thing in her office aside from the chair which Henry occupied facing the desk. It was a very sparse office. Henry was nervous. The room seemed somewhere fit to conduct a police interrogation. What would his mother think if they expelled him? What

would his brother think? He had worked so hard. He didn't even want to think about what his Pa would do. He winced just thinking about it.

"Mr. Sinclair, I don't have to tell you why you're here." She said.

"No, mam." Henry said with his eyes on the floor, visibly shaking.

"What I do need to tell you is that I am doing you something of a service. You have beaten this boy so egregiously that we had to send for a doctor. You've broken his nose and possibly a few of his ribs. I should expel you, or perhaps even let the police deal with you. Instead, I have decided to bring you here and ask you why."

"Well, mam..." Henry hesitated. He was nervous.

"You'll understand that I'm a busy woman, Mr Sinclair," Principal Gentry interjected, the green eyes never leaving Henry, whose own brown eyes stayed firmly planted on the floor. "Look at me, young man, and tell me why you did this or I will wash my hands of it and allow a juvenile judge to consider the implications of your actions."

Henry just about shit himself. The only thing that scared him more than his mother was being one of those boys on a chain gang. He didn't think he was cut out for that kind of life. He couldn't bear that kind of shame.

"He was bragging about his brother in Germany mam. And then he turned around and told me that my brother was a sissy for serving in the Pacific and that's where they send the girls." Something resembling anger passed briefly over Dolores Gentry's face before she quickly returned it to its previous steely neutrality.

"He insulted your brother?"

"Yesmam."

“But moreso than that, he insulted the service, integrity and sacrifice of all our servicemen and women.”

“Yesmam, but especially my brother.”

“Young man, I’m going to send you home for the day. Calm down, relax, and come back tomorrow. I’ll have a word with this boy when he gets back.”

Henry couldn’t believe his luck. The chain gang disappeared from his mind’s eye.

“So I’m not getting expelled mam?”

“No. I think we can make an exception in this case. You were clearly provoked.”

“I’m not going to prison mam?”

“They don’t generally put 5th graders in prison, young man. Go home, calm down, and come back tomorrow.”

Henry got up to leave. “Thank you mam.”

“Understand this, though, Young man, I am not condoning your use of violence. Rather, I understand your affliction and realize that in the same situation, it would take nothing less than a saint to turn the other cheek. You’re not a saint are you boy?”

“No, Mam. Certainly not. My ma tells me I’m a blasphemous little demon sometimes.” He said, with the complete veracity only children are capable of.

“However, do not misunderstand me when I say that this will *not* happen again.”

“Of course not mam.”

“I understand that your mother has been reached and advised regarding the situation. She’s on her way to get you. She should be here shortly.”

“Yesmam.”

“Have a good rest of the day, Mr Sinclair. And apologize to Mr Douglas for interrupting his class and causing him stress.”

“Yes mam, You too mam.”

February 1945

Hey there Hanky,

Just thought I'd drop you another line to let you know I'm doing fine. The sensor's still pretty strict. And the rations are still pretty awful. Life's pretty good right now though, I'm stationed somewhere in the southwest pacific, talking to the natives eating coconuts. There are grass skirts and grass houses all over the place. It's a amazing. I heard somebody say once that only millionaires and soldiers get to travel and you know I think that's right because I never would've imagined places like this existed had it not been for the army. The natives are surprisingly smart and have learned quite a bit of English. Some folks here are none to kind to them but I have no problem with them. On another note, I doubt we have one woman here to three hundred men. I can't remember the last time I had a meaningful conversation with a woman. I'll never be an Island Boy, either. As charming as this place might be (aside from that ratio), I can't stomach the traditional dish of fish and poi. Not a whole lot I can say, but write me and let me know what's going on with your life. I love you buddy and miss

you terribly. When I get back we'll go camping, go out to some baseball games -- all of the stuff we used to do. Take care of Ma and Pa for me.

You're the man of the house now,

Johnny

Henry put down the letter from Johnny with his heart hurting and his head swimming from everything that happened throughout the day. He was wondering how his classmates would treat him after today.

His mother had not been angry. She had been conflicted. The only thing she had said about the fight to Henry was "Remember Henry, there's no winner in a fight. Even if you win, you still lose. Most times it's better to just turn the other cheek. But I'm proud of you for standing up for you brother." She was downstairs making dinner. The mail had come and Hank hadn't gone down to ask about it because he was experiencing a feeling of trepidation. "Hanky come down here!" His mother yelled. Henry sprinted down the stairs, trying to get down as fast as possible to avoid delay and making his mother angrier.

"Mom?"

She stood there with the mail in her hands, with an open letter. She had tears in her eyes and a big smile on her face. He couldn't see the envelope, all the other mail was in the way.

"Johnny's coming home, baby, now go get washed up for dinner."

Henry cleaned up and then ate dinner with his family. His mother had cooked pork chops which were his favorite, and made some potatoes to eat on the side. The conversation centered around what everybody was going to do to get ready for Johnny's return and what they were all going to do together once he got back. After dinner Henry ran up stairs to his room and grabbed a book of matches he had in one of his drawers and went under the bed and took the cigarette he'd taken from his brother before he left. He'd been saving it all this time for the perfect moment. He had never smoked before. He grabbed the cigarette and ran outside and down the street from his house so that his mother wouldn't see him. *Johnny's coming home.*

He lit a match and had some difficulty lighting the cigarette with it. Once he was able to get it started he took a long deep drag as he had seen his father and brother do so many times in the past. He started coughing violently. He wondered if he'd ever breath again in those few seconds that he choked on smoke. He panicked and threw the rest of the it away. It was disgusting. He was expecting something much more pleasurable. He instantly felt nauseated and didn't even make it home before he vomited. He wondered what would make anybody want one of those. Henry got home, still feeling ill, and lied down in his bed with an upset stomach, a terrible headache, and a big smile on his face. *Johnny's coming home.*