



THE LAST STRAW

EMORY AHLBERG



The Last Straw

Part 2

IX

Flak at twelve thousand feet. Eddie rotates the turret, tracking black bursts blooming and dissolving like ink in milk. The twin fifties sit cold against his palms. Below, the coast north of Lae unspools: near-black jungle canopy, a silt-brown river mouth, and somewhere in the trees, the supply depot they've been ordered to destroy, and the people they've been sent to kill.

The intercom crackles. Tommy's voice from the nose: "Bomb run in ninety seconds, hold her steady, Cap."

Walt's voice, even and unhurried: "Holding."

Eddie's knees are against his chest, spine curved against the armor plate. Thirty-six inches of space, and every inch the job: azimuth, elevation, rate of closure, trigger discipline. His hands know what to do. His eyes know where to look. There's no room for anything else, which is why he has kept climbing in. The turret is the only place in the world where he is exactly the right size.

The first flak burst hits, ringing the airframe like a bell. Shrapnel ticks against the fuselage like gravel thrown at a window. Someone yells on the intercom, maybe Frank, maybe Al. Doesn't matter. Eddie tracks a burst pattern, calculating the gunners' lead, and rotates the turret fifteen degrees to cover the belly as Walt begins the run. *The Last Straw* straightens and slows, committed now, flying level through a corridor of black smoke, and he watches the earth tilt and stabilize beneath him.

"Bombs away," Tommy says, and Eddie feels the aircraft lurch as the weight drops free.

Then the Zeros come.

Three of them, climbing from the fighter strip, small and fast and olive-drab against the jungle. He sees them before anyone else—the ball turret gunner always does, because the ball turret gunner is the only one looking straight down at the world that's trying to murder them. He calls it in. "Fighters low, five o'clock, three bandits climbing."

The first Zero pulls up and rolls onto their tail. Earl's guns open up from the top turret, the sound muffled by the fuselage between them. **BRRRRAP-BRRRRAP**. The second Zero breaks wide, swinging out and under, and now it's Eddie's—a dark shape sliding across the green below, growing larger in the glass.

He tracks it. The Zero climbs straight at him—nose up, cannon ports visible, looming in the glass like a fist being drawn back. He presses the triggers. The fifties hammer his wrists, tracers streaking toward the fighter.

The Zero rolls out and swings back around. It's fast. Faster than Eddie. It lines up again, head-on this time, climbing directly at the ball turret, and he's looking right down the barrels of its twenty-millimeter cannons. Nothing between them but the curved dome and the air. He should break off—rotate, call the top turret to engage, stop playing chicken with a plane that has twice his firepower.

He doesn't.

He holds the Zero in his sights and fires into the climb, and the Zero fires too, and the tracers cross in the air between them like stitches. Eddie's rounds find the engine cowling. There's a flash, and the Zero trails smoke and drops away. The whole time he's staring straight down through the glass at the thing that should kill him and doesn't look away.

The third Zero makes its pass.

Eddie hears it before he understands—a sound unlike any he knows, a deep percussive crack followed by a scream of metal. *The Last Straw* shudders hard enough to blur his vision.

The intercom erupts. Al's voice, high and ragged: "Waist! We're hit in the waist!"

Then Tommy, cursing and shouting something Eddie can't make out.

Then Bobby, calling for Walt.

The voices overlap, tangle, and cut in and out. From his turret

facing the earth, Eddie can't see inside the aircraft, can't see what happened. But he hears Bobby yelling for a first aid kit and telling someone to hold pressure. Then Al on the intercom—"Frank?" Two seconds of silence. Then Al screams. It's a high, thin shriek breaking into a moan, the kind of sound a dog makes when it's been hit by a car—wet, airless, keening, and it goes on and on, and Eddie, curled in glass twelve feet below, grips the firing handles, listening to Al sob the name over and over—*Frank, Frank, Frankie, oh Jesus, Frankie*—until Walt's voice cuts through: "Shut it down, Al." Someone switches off the channel. The static where the screaming was is worse.

The third Zero comes around again. Eddie kills it. Two bursts, mechanical and precise, and it cartwheels into the canopy below and Eddie watches the fireball bloom in the green and feels exactly nothing.

The flight home takes two hours. He spends them in the turret, rotating slowly, scanning for threats that don't come. The intercom is dead except for the background hiss. Nobody's talking. No jokes or bitching, just the steady drone of four engines and the cold pressing in through the glass.

When they land, he cranks the turret into the exit position and climbs out into the light. The hardstand is bright and hot, and the ground crew is already running toward the aircraft with a stretcher. He walks aft along the fuselage.

Tommy is alive. They're pulling him out of the nose—the plexiglass is shattered, the bombardier's seat dark with blood. Tommy is gray-faced, conscious, and missing most of his left hand. The same hand that slapped Eddie between the shoulder blades at the straw draw. The medics work fast. Tommy doesn't scream. He just stares at place where his fingers used to be with an expression of polite confusion, as if someone told him a joke he doesn't quite get.

What's left of Frank is in the waist. Eddie doesn't look for long. A twenty-millimeter cannon at close range has turned him into something unrecognizable. Not just dead. Unmade. His body is laid out along the portside wall. Someone has tried to cover his face with a blood-soaked rag, but it's not enough. Frank's hands—the hands that held the makeup brush, that smoothed the wig onto Eddie's scalp, that tested lipstick on his own wrist—are untouched. Everything else is wrong.

Eddie leaves him and walks along the fuselage, past the nose, past the girl. He doesn't look at her. He walks to the hut, sits on his cot, and holds the sea glass in his injured palm. The glass is smooth and cool, fitting in his hand as if made for exactly this—for holding onto while everything else comes apart.

A few minutes or an hour later, Walt walks in. No cap. A streak of engine grease on his sleeve. His face is calm, the way it always is, but there's blood dried in the lines of his neck. He crouches in front of the cot so their eyes are level. "Hey, kid."

"I ain't a goddamn kid. Sir."



Walt doesn't blink. He's close enough that Eddie can see the gold flecks in his irises, the way his left eyebrow is always a little crooked, like something is permanently funny. "Yeah, I know," he says, voice soft. "You did good up there." He glances at Eddie's hand. "You hurt?"

Eddie shakes his head. "It's old."

Walt holds Eddie's hand and looks. There's a thin red line along the base of his thumb. "Next time, let Jimmy patch you up. Or me."

He says it like it's nothing, but he stays crouched, close enough that Eddie has to look anywhere but at his face. If he looks, he'll see that he's doing that slow, careful scan again, like he's reading a manual for a machine nobody's ever seen before.

Walt stands. "You need anything, you come get me. Even if it's nothing. We're still a crew, even if we're busted up and bleeding." His voice is steady. "We're still a crew."

That night, they drink to Frank in the mess tent. Eddie sits with them, says the right things, laughs at the right memories, and drinks until the edges go soft. When Al nods toward Eddie and says, "The best thing Frankie ever did is make us the best-looking dame on the airfield," everyone laughs. Eddie laughs loudest.

Because it is fucking funny. Frank, who could make a girl out of a

boy with melted lipstick and a shitty dress in a plywood hut. Frank, who told a major to go fuck himself and got away with it. Frank, who cut the crew's hair with a razor he never cleaned and made every last one of them look like a movie star. A dozen twenty-millimeter rounds turned him into hamburger. But Eddie's still here, because the world takes the people who make things beautiful and leaves the people who were never real.

The laughter echoes around him, and the more the crew laughs, the heavier it gets, because Eddie is the joke. He's always been the joke. The girl on the airplane, the kid in the dress—the funniest thing this crew ever did, and he's sitting in the middle of it, grinning until his jaw aches, because the joke is never going to stop.

Come morning, he volunteers for the next mission before the hangover clears.

X

More missions. Rabaul. Wewak. Nadzab. Cape Gloucester. The names stop meaning anything after a while—they're just coordinates on Davey's charts, targets on a map, places where the sky fills with black smoke and the aircraft shakes and Eddie rotates the turret and does his job.

Davey transfers out in September. Orders to a training unit stateside, which means someone's father pulled a string or someone's paperwork got lucky. He shakes hands with the crew on the hardstand, and Eddie watches him walk to the transport and thinks: *That's one.* Bobby goes next—malaria, bad enough to put him in the hospital tent. He leaves with the medevac, hair plastered to his forehead and eyes rolling in his head, and doesn't even say goodbye. Maybe doesn't know he's leaving at all.

Walt puts a hand on Eddie's shoulder. "You okay?"

Eddie nods. Bobby's cot is already stripped, as if he never existed. "Yeah."

Walt stands there a minute, hand still at Eddie's shoulder, thumb and forefinger pressing in, like he's checking for a pulse. "We'll get a replacement. Maybe two. You'll have to break them in. Show them how we do things."

Eddie shrugs. His body feels hollow, like the bones are gone, and he's stitched together out of string and sweat and whatever's left over when the good parts get blown out the side of an airplane. "Sure."

The new waist gunner is named Pete, or Paul—Eddie can't keep it straight for the first week, and by the second week it doesn't matter because Pete-or-Paul catches flak over Hollandia and goes home missing an eye.

The replacements come faster than Eddie can learn their faces. He stops trying. He learns their positions instead—the new tail gunner, the new radio operator, the new navigator. They're younger every time, or



maybe Eddie is just getting older, which at twenty feels like a thing that shouldn't be possible but is happening anyway. His jaw is sharper. His shoulders are wider. Not much—Eddie will never be a big man—but enough. The bones in his face are settling, hardening into a man with a combat record, and every time he catches his reflection in the plexiglass of the turret, the girl is further away.

Sometimes, she's almost gone.

Eddie keeps rotating the turret, scouring the sky, counting the seconds between bursts of flak. The more he flies, the more he feels like a moving target—a number painted on a hull, waiting for some bored Japanese gunner to blow him apart. But he keeps climbing in. The ball is home. The world shrinks to the twin fifties, the cracked intercom, the sweat running down his spine and pooling at the base of his tailbone. He can breathe in here.

The rest of the time, he tries not to think at all. Not about the nose art, or the way Walt lingers after every mission, waiting for Eddie to wander up and make small talk. He's always got a reason. A maintenance check. A ration of coffee. A question about the topography along the Sepik, even though Davey's gone and nobody else cares. Sometimes Walt just stands there, hands in his pockets, and asks Eddie



how he's holding up. Like it's a real question.

It isn't. Nothing's real anymore except the turret and the missions and the way the girl on the nose fades a little every day. The paint's already going chalky. The last time Eddie looks close, there's a bullet hole through the cloud. Not a big one. Maybe from a .303, or a shard of flak. The primer gray peeks out from the steel beneath, a wound that's not going to heal. Walt could touch it up, but he doesn't. Maybe he understands: let it wear down. Let the sun and the rain and the war sandblast every beautiful thing down to nothing.

Months pass. The Pacific war grinds westward. Eddie makes Sergeant, then Staff Sergeant. A commendation for the mission where Frank died. A Bronze Star for something over Leyte that he hardly remembers—a Zero on their tail, the top turret jammed, Eddie rotating the ball and firing upward at an angle the turret wasn't designed for, killing the fighter outright. The crew cheers. Even Walt. Doesn't matter. Next mission comes up and they fly it, and the one after that, and the one after that.

The crew is down to four originals now. Walt, Earl, Al, and Eddie. The rest are walking bandages or names on paperwork. The replacements come in ones and twos. They don't last long.

And then, impossibly, it's over.

The war ends on a Wednesday in August. Somebody runs through the camp with a radio, and then everybody's out of the huts, shouting, firing pistols into the air, and a sergeant from the motor pool is crying, and the Australians have broken into the officers' liquor supply and nobody cares. Eddie stands in the middle of it and drinks whatever's handed to him and smiles and shakes hands and claps shoulders and the celebration roars around him, warm and enormous, and he's standing in the middle of it the way he stood in the doorway of Margaret's bedroom at nine years old—close enough to feel the warmth, unable to step inside

Walt walks over with a bottle of whiskey, sits on the edge of Eddie's cot, and pours two tin cups. "Drink," he says.

Eddie takes the cup. The whiskey burns but it's not the good kind, not the kind that makes you laugh and forget what happened. This stuff is harsh, bottom-of-the-drum, scrapes the throat raw. He drinks it anyway. He makes a face. Walt laughs, that slow Georgia drawl, and drinks his own.

They sit on the cot. There's shouting outside, sporadic gunfire, the smell of kerosene and sweat and spilled beer. Walt pours them another.

Eddie says, "So that's it?"

"That's it."

"But... what now?"

Walt shrugs, as if the question is pointless. "Now, we go home."

The word is foreign. He's going home to 34 Moody Street and a mother who will look at his face and see her son, and a mirror that will show him a twenty-one-year-old man, and a door that will still be shut, and a life on the other side he'll never be allowed to live.

Two days later he signs the re-enlistment papers. The form is one page. The pen is Army-issue, black ink. Eddie signs his name the way he always does—small, precise, a signature that takes up as little space as possible. The clerk stamps the date without looking up.

Eddie walks out of the admin hut into the heat and does not go home.

XI

Six years slips by like a finger snap. Korea, 1951. New war, new theater, same old racket. Except the B-29 is wrong. Eddie knows it from the first mission—the pressurized cabin, the remote turrets, the hum of the fire-control computer tracking targets through gunsights that look like periscopes. Everything he relied on is gone. The glass sphere, the thirty-six inches, the world rotating beneath him—replaced by a padded seat and a set of crosshairs and a machine that does half the thinking for him. The tail gun is the only manned position on the aircraft, which is why Eddie takes it. It's the closest he can get to the old war. But the tail of a B-29 isn't the belly of a B-17. It's bigger. There's

room to think, room to move, room for the ghosts to pile in and make themselves at home. Eddie hates it. The tail gun is lonely, the view is wrong, and the war itself feels like a cheap knockoff. Even the uniforms itch in a different way.

The crew is new every mission. He doesn't learn their names, doesn't want to. The pilot is a kid with a baby mustache and a commander's ring he wears on a chain around his neck. The rest are just bodies in flight suits, moving through the checklist, smoking, bitching, eating cold spam out of a can.

He just does the job. He doesn't think about the crew, or the mission, or the fact that the tail gun is so far from everyone you might as well be dead already. The sky is a flat, hard gray and the contrails twist behind like scars. When the MiGs come, they come fast. Faster than Zeros, faster than anything Eddie's ever seen. He tracks them in the gunsight, works the triggers, watches the tracers cross the air, but it isn't the same. In the old war, every shot felt like a miracle. Here, it's a chore. You do your job. You come home, or you don't.

The girl inside is quieter now, and that's something. Most days, Eddie doesn't think about her at all. He tells himself she was just something that happened in the old war, a fever dream brought on by the jungle and long hours in the turret and Frank's hands working the makeup brush.

But sometimes, in the long blue hours between missions, he sits in the NCO tent with the others, drinking old coffee, and he remembers. Usually, it's just a flash. The way the wig felt on the back of his neck. The makeup on his skin. The taste of the lipstick.

Sometimes he remembers the sound of Walt's voice, low and steady and kind, telling him to relax, and for half a second his shoulders actually do. Sometimes he remembers the way the drawing looked—the face that wasn't his, except it was—and the wanting comes back, sudden and sharp, and he can feel that *thing* rising, rising, rising like a flare, burning its way up through all the shit he's tried to bury it under.

He presses his hands to his thighs and stares at the Formica tabletop. The NCO tent is loud, full of smoke and voices, but he can't hear any of it right now. He's somewhere else. Jackson Field. The cracked mirror. The tickle of a wig, the smell kerosene, the moment when Walt looked at him and said, "***Hold that, stay exactly like that.***" He wants it so bad his teeth hurt, and he wants it to please, *please* stop so he can breathe again.

He digs his nails into his thigh, under the table, and stares at the cheap mug with the chipped rim. The voices around him blur into a single, ugly sound. The laughter. The cigarettes. The stink of coffee and sweat. No one is looking at him. No one ever does. He is a ghost in this tent, a shadow behind the glass, and the thing in his chest is a wound that's never going to close.

Sometimes he dreams about her. Not often. When he does, she's never in a jungle or a tent, never in a war at all. She's walking down



Moody Street in the evening, hair curled, skirt swishing, and nobody looks twice. Not a single man there has ever seen her before, and that's the best part. She's not a freak. Not a joke. She's just a girl, walking home in the dusk, and the world fits her right.

But that's a dream, and Eddie wakes up in Korea, in a tent full of snores and sweat and men who don't care if he wakes up at all. Sometimes he thinks they'd prefer if he didn't. There's always a replacement waiting, always a new war. So he lies there, staring at the canvas ceiling, until the memory fades. Then he rolls over, tugs the blanket tight, and waits for morning.

But mostly, he forgets. Or thinks he does. You can get used to anything, even waking up every morning in the wrong skin.

The letters from Walt arrive every two weeks, postmarked Savannah. They're warm and easy. Walt writes the way he talks, unhurried, full of small details. The azaleas on Bull Street. A stray cat he's feeding. A gallery in Charleston that offered to show his paintings. He never mentions the nose art. He never mentions the sittings or the charcoal or the wig. He asks how Eddie is, and Eddie writes back, and the letters he writes are the careful, edited performances of a man constructing a version of himself on paper. He writes as if Walt is still

his commanding officer, as if there's a right answer. He tells Walt about the cold, the chow, the new bombers with their idiot-proofed systems. He never mentions the dreams. He never mentions the girl. He never mentions the way his hands shake, or the way the air in the tail gunner's compartment feels like a tomb.

The hit comes on a night run over Pyongyang.

Anti-aircraft shell, close enough that Eddie sees the flash before he hears it. The tail section buckles. The pressure seal blows and the cold hits him like a wall of ice—sixty below, instant, everywhere—and then the floor is gone. A ragged hole where the deck plating was, three feet across, the edges peeled back like a tin can, and through the hole he can see the night. Black sky, black ground, the exhaust glow of the engines reflected off the clouds below. Wind screams through the breach. His headset is dead. The intercom is dead. He's alone in the tail of a damaged aircraft at twenty-eight thousand feet, and the hole is right there.

Eddie looks down through it.

There's nothing between him and the earth but five miles of dark air. The cold is so deep it burns, wind knifing his jaw and crawling under his collar. He braces his boots against the rib of the tail and waits for the world to decide if it wants to keep him.

If he let go, the slipstream would take him. Simple as tossing a cigarette butt out the window. The thought is clean, almost elegant. He could just... let go.

This is the boat.

There was a story, wasn't there? A parable? About a man in a flood and God keeps sending boats, and the man lets them pass, waiting for something else. Waiting for God Himself to reach down and pluck him out of the water. And the man drowns, and when he gets to Heaven, he says, *God, why didn't you save me?* And God says, *I sent you three boats, you idiot.*

Eddie looks at the hole. God has been sending boats for eight years—the Zeros, the flak, every mission Eddie volunteered for—and Eddie kept climbing out of the wreckage, kept walking away, kept waking up in the morning. But this one. This is the easy one. Thumb on the latch, lean forward, and the wind does the rest. No one would know. Combat loss. One more kid from Lowell who didn't come home.

His thumb touches the latch. The wind howls. He braces his boots and stares down. Black air, black ground, nothing between him and the fast way out.

He thinks about the girl on the nose of the B-17, the one with his face, and about Walt's hands, steady on the sketchbook, and about Frank, who made him beautiful for three days in June of 1943, and if he carries those memories all the way down, maybe he'll wake up and be her. Not Eddie Coyle, not in the war, not in the tail gun and the dark and the cold that's eating his bones. The girl, the real one, the one who lived for three days in a bomber's nose and was beautiful because someone



saw her that way. Maybe she's waiting at the bottom. The thought is so clear it shines.

A tremor runs through him, up from the wind, or maybe from deeper. The latch bites into his thumb. He's ready.

What if.

The same two words from the hardstand at Jackson Field, from the last time he stood in front of her and touched the edge of the painting. It's not a voice, exactly. Not even a thought. Something older.

Eddie's thumb moves off the release. He grips the seat frame and holds on—forty-seven minutes, the aircraft limping south toward Yokota, the cold eating through his flight suit and the wind screaming through the hole and Eddie holding on, holding on, holding on—and when the ground crew pulls him out of the wrecked tail section, they have to pry his fingers open one at a time.

The flight surgeon grounds him. Eddie requests a transfer. Not home. Someplace new.

XII

Eddie loves Japan. And he hates loving it because he spent years

fighting people who look just like the shopkeepers, the schoolgirls, the men biking to work in gray jackets.

He knew, of course, that they were people like him, but in the war, people turned into targets, and targets turned into numbers, and the numbers were written down in a logbook and filed away forever. Now, each morning, Eddie steps out into a neighborhood of tiled roofs and clipped hedges and air so clean it's like drinking cold water after a fever. He can't get used to it. He doesn't want to. But every morning he walks to the corner shop for cigarettes and strong coffee, and the old woman behind the counter bows and says, "*Ohayou gozaimasu,*" and Eddie bows back. He never means to, it just happens.

He's a supervisor at the Camp Drake supply depot, a job that sounds important until you see it up close. Eddie sits in a prefab shed with a battered ledger and three Japanese clerks who ignore him until he's needed to sign something. He spends the days counting crates of canned peaches and instant noodles, then initials the forms, careful and neat, just as he always has. The base commander doesn't care what happens out here as long as the requisition numbers match the orders. Sometimes the numbers don't match. Eddie fixes them, pencils in a new total, and nobody ever checks.

It's December 1st, 1952. Eddie is twenty-eight years old, and someone has left a copy of the New York Daily News on the table in the Camp Drake rec room.

EX-GI BECOMES BLONDE BEAUTY

The headline is two inches tall. Eddie reads it standing up, his coffee going cold in his hand, while around him six or seven soldiers crowd the table and react like soldiers do to anything—loud, crude, competing to be the funniest.

"They cut his dick off?"

"In Denmark. The Danes'll do anything, apparently."

"So what is he now? She? It?"

"Says here a she. Christine. Used to be George."

"Christine." Someone whistles. "She's blonde, too. I've seen uglier WACs."

Laughter. Eddie stares at the photograph. Blonde hair, lipstick, pearls. A woman's face on a page that says she used to be a man, that she flew to Copenhagen and doctors there did something that nobody's ever done before. Changed her.

"Sarge, you see this?" someone says. "Guy from the Bronx became a broad. A real broad."

Eddie sets his coffee down. His hand is steady. His face is smiling. "Sick bastard," he says, and the words come easily, the right words, in



the right tone, with the right amount of disgust, and the soldiers laugh and move on, and Eddie picks up the newspaper and takes it with him because no one is paying attention anymore.

How? How does it work? The newspaper doesn't say. The article is five paragraphs, half of it filler. But the photograph is real. Pearls, lipstick, a knowing smile. A woman's face, not a joke or a cartoon, not a sideshow. A woman. Eddie stares at it in the rec room's fluorescent light, and the world around him goes out of focus.

Because he's crying.

When was the last time he cried? Not in Korea. Not since the mission where Frank died. Maybe not even then. Because Staff Sergeant Eddie Coyle doesn't cry. He clenches his jaw and holds the sea glass and stares at walls and waits for things to pass. But this woman on the front page of the Daily News—this blonde beauty who used to be a soldier, who used to be George—she's smiling, and she's real, and the door Eddie has held shut for twenty-eight years is one someone else has already walked through. Not in a dream. Not in a bomber's nose for three days in June. In the world. In daylight. On the front page of a newspaper, smiling like she belongs there.

Part of him wants to hate her. He tries. But the longer he stares at

the photo, the more the anger slides sideways into something else.

What if.

And for the first time, he doesn't shove it down. He lets the ache tunnel through him, raw and bright and endless. The laughter fades. The rec room is a thousand miles away. All he can see is the woman on the page, her smile, the way her eyes seem to say: *I made it. I'm here.*

He tears the page from the paper and folds it into fourths. He sticks it in his pocket. He walks back to the shed, initials invoices, eats lunch, and the whole time the photo is burning a hole in his pocket. He wants to look at it every five minutes, but he waits until it's midnight, then closes the shed and walks back to his room, and only then does he unfold the page and stare at the photograph until his eyes go raw.

That night, he dreams she's walking down Moody Street, just like before, but this time Eddie is watching from the window of a barbershop. The glass is fogged, but he can see her. Her head is down, a little smile flickering on her mouth as if she's thinking of something funny. The streetlights catch her hair, turn it gold. When she gets to the corner, she looks up—right at him.

Eddie wakes with a ragged breath and the taste of lipstick on his mouth.



Walt's letters keep coming. The latest sits on Eddie's bunk for five days. On the sixth night, Eddie sits on the edge of the mattress with his boots still on and slits the envelope with his thumb. Walt has left Savannah. He's in New York now, painting, selling some, teaching some.

Eddie —

New York is loud but the light is good. Found a park on the west side where the trees are tall enough to block the buildings. I go there Sundays with the sketchpad. There's a woman on the third floor who brings me pie whether I ask or not. Pecan. She says I'm too thin. She's probably right. I'm doing a portrait of her son. He's ten, likes baseball, wants to be a scientist. He holds still for hours. You'd like him. I think you'd like her, too. She reminds me a little of you.

I hope Japan is treating you well. I haven't heard from you in a long time and I'm a little worried. Write when you can.

— W

The "W" is big and loose at the bottom of the page, like he's signing a painting. Eddie reads it twice. He folds it and puts it in the footlocker with the others—the medals, the sea glass, the crew photograph from Jackson Field, the newspaper photo of Christine.

He wonders if Walt remembers the girl who lived for three days in June of 1943, if he ever thinks about the sittings and sketches. He wonders if Walt knows that some days, the only thing keeping Eddie upright is the memory of a man holding a sketchbook and saying, "Stay exactly like that."

The days bleed into weeks. Eddie counts crates of transistor radios, initials customs forms in triplicate, bows to the old woman at the corner shop. The American NCOs on base call him "Sergeant," bark it, really, but the Japanese clerks just call him "Coyle-san," and there's something about the way they say it that feels better—softer, maybe, like they know he isn't the kind of sergeant who yells at people.

Eddie hears about Shinjuku in line at the PX, a tattered comic book and a pack of Lucky Strikes in his hand. There's two MPs in front of him, arguing about leave in Tokyo. One says, "You ever been up to Shinjuku at night?" The other laughs, says, "That's where the weirdos go." His voice drops to a dramatic hush. "Men in dresses, like, for real. Singing in clubs. You wouldn't believe it."

His body tenses. For a second, he feels the pressure of the ball turret again, the world tightening around him. He stares at the crack in the floor tile, breath stopped in his chest. It's nothing. Just two MPs talking shit. But he can't move—a hand around his windpipe, invisible, perfect.

“Guy I know, he’s a lieutenant,” the first MP is saying. “He got drunk, wandered in there, starts talking to a pretty girl only to find out it’s a man. He got so mad he broke its nose.” The MP laughs, loud enough to draw a look from the bored cashier. “But he swears he never saw a prettier set of legs.”

The other MP snorts. “Bullshit, I bet he went back. Most of the officers are queers.”

“Yeah, probably.” They pay for their cigarettes and move on, still laughing.

Eddie stands in line, staring at the scuffed floor tiles. The comic book is curling in his hand. The guy behind the counter says, “Next,” and Eddie steps forward, voice steady, face bland. He buys what he came for.

He walks out of the PX. Sun in his eyes, wind tugging at his shirt collar. He doesn’t look at anyone on the walk back to Camp Drake. He doesn’t think about Shinjuku. He doesn’t think about the MPs, or how his heart is still beating too hard, or how he wants to puke.

He gets to his room, sits on the edge of the bed, and stares at the wall for a while. The cinderblock is painted a nauseating pale green. The color of hospitals, or maybe old teeth. He stares until the tension drains from his jaw, then he sets the comic on the footlocker and changes his shirt. There’s a mirror on the back of the door. He glances at it, just long enough to remember not to look. The face in the mirror is thin and tired. The hair’s too short. The mouth is nothing special. He buttons the shirt, tucks it in, and checks for any trace of the man he used to be—the one who would’ve laughed with the MPs, maybe even added something meaner. No sign of him. Maybe he’s gone.

He thinks about the newspaper photo of Christine in the footlocker. He wonders if she’s ever had to sit with her hands clenched in her lap, hating the way her face looked in a mirror, hoping nobody saw the hunger in her eyes.

He wonders if she’s ever been to Shinjuku.

The streets behind Golden Gai are wet, and neon reflects off the pavement in long smears of red and blue. Eddie walks fast, head down, boots loud on the concrete.

He finds the alley without asking for directions. The sign above the door is in kanji, painted red and gold. He has no idea what it means. He stands under the awning until the rain soaks through his collar, then pushes through the door.

The bar is the size of a large closet—eight stools, a counter, bottles stacked to the ceiling. Behind the counter, a woman in her fifties sports an updo the size of an artillery shell and lipstick like lacquered plums. She pours beer with one hand, smokes with the other. She sizes up Eddie: the uniform, the boots, the stripes. Her eyes lock on his face.



“Ah,” she says. “American-san. Welcome.” Her voice is low and dry, but her English is perfect. She flicks her cigarette into a saucer, grinds it out, and gestures at the counter. “You like whiskey?”

He sits. The stool is a little too short. His knees don’t fit under the lip of the bar. He bumps them and bites back a curse. The woman behind the counter grins, lips tight around her cigarette.

“You want Japanese or American whiskey?”

“Maybe both.”

The bartender laughs. “You got money for both?”

He slides a couple of yen coins across the counter. The woman palms them, pours the first with her left hand—Japanese—and the second with her right—American. Her pours are careful, even. She’s watching him the whole time, just taking his measure.

She doesn’t speak again until he drains the first glass. Both whiskeys burn, but the Japanese one is smoother. He notices, and the bartender notices him noticing.

“Better, yes?” She grins. “Suntory. American whiskey is for cowboys. Is that what you are?”

He doesn’t answer right away. He finishes the whiskey, savoring the burn, the way it coils down and settles. The air in here is thick with

smoke and the tang of spilled beer. He's never felt more out of place, which is saying something.

"Not a cowboy," he finally says.

There are three other people in the bar. Two huddle at the far end of the counter, talking fast in Japanese. The third occupies a stool beside Eddie. He looks—carefully—and sees a young person in a green dress, hair pinned up, makeup perfect and beautiful, shoulders bare. He can't tell if this is a man or woman.

The person in the green dress catches him looking. He looks away, and the person laughs—a bright, fun sound, not mean at all, actually kind of delighted.

"Mama," they say, leaning across the empty stool toward Eddie, "he's shy. Look at him. An American soldier and he's shy." The voice is light, teasing, pitched higher than he expects. The person in the dress has a round, pretty face, and when they smile, it's all teeth and a little challenge.

"Leave him alone, Keiko," the mama-san says. "He just got here."

"I'm not bothering him. Am I bothering you?" Keiko leans closer. He can smell perfume—jasmine, maybe. "You're very thin," she says, looking at Eddie the way Frank looked at him once upon a time, appraising, professional. "I like thin. Thin is good. But you can't wear that in here." She points at his jacket. "Take it off. You look like you're here to arrest somebody."

"I'm not here to—"

"Take it off. Mama, tell him."

The mama-san shrugs. "She's right. You look like trouble."

He unbuttons the jacket. He folds it over his arm, awkward, and sets it on the bar. The mama-san grins, like she's just won a bet. "Much better. You have nice arms."

Keiko approves, too. "Now you look like someone who's here to have fun. What's your name?"

"Eddie."

"Eddie." She says it the way you taste a word you've never tried before. "That's a boy's name."

He stares at his drink. "It's my name," he says.

"Not tonight, it isn't." Her smile is sharp but not mean, teeth white against the lipstick. "Tonight, you can pick any name you want. Isn't that right, Mama?"

The bartender shrugs like this is old news. "In here, you are who you feel like."

Keiko nods. "But being a boy is boring. All the best people are something else, don't you think?"

Eddie doesn't know what to say. The whiskey is making his mouth dry. "I guess."

Her eyes flick up and down, then she frowns like she's seen something out of place. Her lashes flicker. "You okay?"

"Sure." He manages a smile. "Just tired."



“How long have you been tired?”

The bar is quiet—just the jazz on the turntable and the murmur of the couple at the far end. “A while.” Eddie turns the glass on the counter. “My whole life.”

Keiko puts her hand on his wrist. Her fingers are cool and light. “You’re not like the other soldiers who come here.” Her gaze moves over his face again. “You’re not here to laugh at us.”

“No.”

Mama-san finishes her cigarette and pours herself a glass, bottle clinking on the rim. “Salud,” she says, and tips the glass back. Her lipstick leaves a perfect print.

She is still holding Eddie’s wrist, just lightly. “Mama, give him more whiskey, I’m going to tell him a story.”

The mama-san refills Eddie’s glass, and Keiko talks about herself. She’s twenty-three, from Osaka, came to Tokyo after the war. She works in a department store during the day as a boy; at night, she comes here as a girl. She tells him this the way you’d tell a stranger the weather, as if the distance between the department store and the bar, between the day and the night, between the boy and the girl, is just a commute.

When she’s done, he asks one question: “How did you know?”

She tilts her head. "What?"

"That you weren't..." He looks at his glass. "That you wanted—that you should be..."

Keiko blinks, then smiles, soft before. "I was little, maybe three or four. My mother caught me in her kimono. She hit me with a slipper and told me I was a bad boy." She drains her drink and flashes him a look. "After that, I learned to hide it. But I always knew." She raises her eyebrows, then grins, the challenge back on her face. "You want to see the dress I wear when I sing?"

Eddie says yes.

XIV

Eddie has been coming to the bar for three months. He knows the rules now. He changes out of his uniform at a bathhouse six blocks from Golden Gai, folds the khakis into a bag, and walks the rest in civilian clothes—a white shirt, dark trousers, a coat he bought at a stall in Ueno for a dollar. He never takes the same route twice. He arrives after nine and leaves before one. He's careful in the way only a person with everything to lose can be. The care is exhausting, but what happens in the bar is worth it.

The mama-san's name is Hanako. She doesn't ask Eddie questions. She pours his drink, wipes the counter, and lets him sit. If the bar is empty she plays records—Billie Holiday, Misora Hibari, sometimes a French singer Eddie doesn't know. If the bar is full—five, six people on a busy night—Hanako watches over the room like a woman tending a greenhouse, adjusting the temperature with a look, a word, a refill. Eddie has never met anyone who can say so much by saying nothing.

Keiko is the opposite. Keiko is a rainstorm.

"Eddie. Eddie, Eddie, Eddie." She's two drinks in, leaning against the counter, her chin on her hand. Eddie thinks she's very pretty, but not the way the boys in the barracks mean it—not dirty, not a joke, just pretty. Like a singer on a movie poster, or the girl at the end of a long hallway in a good dream.

"Yes, Keiko?"

"Don't you 'Yes Keiko' me." She grins, teeth bright, eyes sharp. "You always do that. You answer like you're still in the Army."

"I am in the Army."

"Not here! And why never just 'yeah, sure, why not,' always 'Yes, Keiko,' like you're taking attendance. Maybe you should be a teacher."

"Maybe."

"You've been coming here for too long," she says.

"You want me to leave?"

"Never. But you sit on that stool. You drink Mama's shochu. You listen to everyone's stories. And you never, ever talk about yourself. Don't you think that's rude?"

"I talk," he says.

“About the weather. About food. Last week you talked about baseball for an hour.”

“I like baseball.”

“Well, I don’t care about baseball. Nobody does. I care about you.”

The funny thing is he’s pretty sure she means it. He laughs, and it’s a real sound, not like the laugh in the NCO tent or at the depot. “That’s your problem. Caring about people. I’m the enemy, you know. The war wasn’t so long ago. You’d think you’d want to spit in my drink or punch me in the nose.”

Keiko makes a face. “The war is the war. That’s for old men to yell about. Me, I like people who are interesting.” She leans in close. “I want to try something.”

She reaches under the counter and brings up a leather case he hasn’t seen before. It’s smaller than Frank’s kit, newer, the zipper intact. Keiko opens it. Compacts, brushes, lipstick in three shades, an eyeliner pencil. She lays them out on the counter like surgical instruments.

His chest goes tight. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m—” He stops, his jaw working. “It won’t look the same.”

“The same as what?”

“As before.”

Keiko waits. She’s good at waiting, better than Eddie expected from a person who talks so much. The bar is quiet—just the two of them and Hanako, who is washing a glass and not looking up.

“Someone did this for me once,” Eddie says. “A long time ago. A guy on my crew. He was good at it. He made me look—” The word catches. “I was nineteen. I was skinny and my skin was—I looked like a girl. A real one. And now I’m almost thirty and I’ve been in two wars and I look like—” He gestures at his own face. “This.”

Keiko’s face changes in a way he’s never seen. The challenge is gone. No teasing, no grin, just a long, soft look, like she’s searching for something behind his eyes. “You think you lost her?”

Eddie looks away. “There was nothing to lose. She wasn’t real.”

“Of course she was. She’s sitting right here. Who do you think I’m talking to?”

Eddie sits there, blinking. The smoke makes his eyes sting, or maybe that’s something else. “She’s not real,” he says again.

Suddenly, Keiko’s hand is on his sleeve. “Prove it.”

“What?”

She pushes the stool closer, her knees bumping the counter. “Let me do your face. If she’s not real, nobody’s going to see her, not even me. But if she is... maybe you’ll see her, too.”

Hanako sets down the glass she’s polishing. She watches them in the mirror behind the bottles. Her eyes are careful, not judging, but not missing a beat.

Keiko's fingers on his wrist are cool and light. "Eddie, trust me."

"I don't want to see it if it's—"

"Trust me."

A minute passes. Nobody says anything. Eddie thinks about standing up, walking out right now, never coming back.

He stays on the stool. "Okay."

Keiko opens the kit. "You ever do this yourself?" She twists the lipstick up so the color shows. It's red, not cheap PX red but a softer color. "Or do you like someone else to do it?"

His hands are flat on the counter. "I never did it myself, not once. When my friend did it, it was a joke. We were..."

For a second, Eddie's back in the hut at Jackson Field, Frank's hands on his jaw, the brush dragging cool powder under his eyes, the cracked mirror propped against the crate. The air in the bar thickens, presses in on him, because then he's watching the medics mop up what's left of Frank inside The Last Straw, and the world gets slippery and red. He closes his eyes, breathes, lets it pass.

"He died," he says. "In the war." He shrugs, like it's nothing. "Not much survives the war."

Keiko nods, doesn't push, just taps the lipstick on the counter, soft. "Let's see what did."

She works quick. Foundation first, but not too thick. Powder, a little sweep along the cheekbone. Eyeliner, the pencil's cold against his eyelid. Keiko's hands are steady and she hums while she works. The song is something American, something old, and Eddie can't place it. Maybe a movie tune. His brain is full of static.

When the liner's done, Keiko holds up her finger. "Wait." She leans in, her face inches from Eddie's, and brushes powder along the cheekbones. "You got good bones," she says. "I'm jealous."

He laughs, and it comes out hoarse.

Keiko uncaps the lipstick. She hesitates, just a second, then says, "Open your mouth a little." He does. She paints it on, careful, steady, gentle. Maybe she's afraid he'll break. Then she leans back, squinting, and gestures toward Hanako. "Mirror?"

Hanako passes it over. No questions. She doesn't even look at Eddie, just wipes the counter and slides the mirror across like it's a drink order.

Keiko flips it open and cups it in her palm, then sets it face-down on the bar. Her hand covers the glass. "Close your eyes."

He does. It's the only thing he can do. He can hear Hanako's glass clinking in the sink, the soft drag of Keiko's sleeve against his arm. Somewhere in the background, Billie Holiday is singing about the moon, or maybe heartbreak.

"Take a breath," Keiko says. "Now open them."

He does.

The mirror is in her hand, tilted toward him. He sees the glass first, then the rest, and for a heartbeat there's nothing at all. His mind blanks



out, skips like a scratched record.

Because he sees her. Not the girl from the nose art, the nineteen-year-old face Frank painted in the cracked mirror with bones too thin for manhood and eyes too big for his face. Not her.

No. In this mirror is a woman.

Not young, but not old either. Not delicate. The jaw is sharper now, the cheekbones higher, the mouth full but set in a line that says I have flown twelve-hour missions and walked out of burning airplanes and watched everyone I loved get scattered like chaff. A woman who's held the firing handles of a ball turret and watched men die and not let it break her. A woman who has lived for years in the wrong skin, in the wrong war, and still, somehow, is here.

For a second, Eddie can't breathe. He's gripping the counter too tight. The knuckles are white.

"There she is," Keiko says, her voice low, almost reverent.

He stares at the face in the glass. The eyes are his. They always have been. But the rest—it's not what he remembers. It's better. The face is tired, but beautiful in a way he can't describe, a way that's quiet and solid and doesn't need to prove anything to anyone. It's the face of a survivor.

Hanako sets a fresh drink in front of him. She meets his gaze in the mirror and nods once, solemn, as if acknowledging something she's seen before. "Not bad," she says. "You could get used to it."

Keiko lifts her glass. "To the lady."

Eddie tries to say something, anything, but the words won't come. His throat is full. His chest is full. He's looking in the mirror and for the first time since three days in June of 1943, he can't look away.

XV

Eddie goes back night after night. He changes out of his uniform at the bathhouse near the station and walks the alleys in civilian clothes. Hanako pours his drink without asking. Keiko saves the stool next to hers. Most nights, she does his face—just for the bar, just for the hours between nine and one—and Eddie sits, letting her work. The brush on his skin is the same brush and a different brush, the same chair and a different chair, and every time she holds up the mirror, the woman's a little closer, as if she's walking toward him through a fog.

Eddie gives Keiko money to shop. More and more often, she'll have a dress waiting for him, or a blouse she says will look perfect. Occasionally, a pair of stockings appears. Always flattering colors, never cheap. He says "thank you," and she makes a face and tells him to buy the next round.

He drinks less now. He laughs more. The first time Keiko asks if he wants to try a dress, he shakes his head, embarrassed. The second time, he says yes. She also has a wig, a nice one. Chestnut brown, shoulder-length. She tells him it suits his face. The first time it goes on, Hanako closes the blinds and puts a sign on the door. For privacy.

Keiko hands him the dress. "Go on. Try it on. I'll turn around."

He does. He's sweating. The fabric slides over his shoulders like nothing he's ever worn before, not even in Port Moresby. It's blue with white flowers, with a line of silver buttons down the front. A little too long in the sleeves, but the way it falls off his body is... not bad. He feels the wig in his hands, and his heart stutters. He puts it on, careful, like it might break.

Keiko is still facing the wall. "You done?"

He clears his throat. "Yeah."

She turns. Not a joke or a laugh out of her. Just a long look up and down. "You're skinny. The wig's perfect. Come here."

Eddie steps forward. The wig itches. Underneath, his scalp is hot, his jaw sharp, but in the little round mirror Keiko holds up, something slides into place. For a second he's weightless. The dress fits him in a way the uniform never did. The chestnut hair frames his face and softens the bones. The makeup is flawless, better than Frank's—softer, as if the face was always there and Keiko just cleared the fog off the glass.

Keiko turns the mirror. "See?"



The bar is quiet. Hanako watches from behind the counter, arms folded.

“Yeah,” Eddie says. “Yeah.”

Keiko twirls in her dress, green with tiny white dots, then gestures for Eddie to try. “Go on. Turn around.”

He does. The skirt sweeps around his legs, light as air, and he laughs, surprised. Keiko laughs, too, and for a while they just swish their skirts, spinning like idiots in the tiny bar, giggling, bumping into stools, and knocking over the ashtray.

Hanako shakes her head and wipes the counter. “Japanese, American, you girls are all the same.” Then she snaps the bar rag straight and hangs it on the hook, but she’s smiling too, in the small, secret way she does when she’s happy with her work.

When the night is over, Eddie washes the makeup off. He buttons his uniform back on. He rides the last train to Saitama and walks through the gate at Camp Drake, shows his ID, and becomes Staff Sergeant Coyle again, and the distance between the bar and the base is forty-five minutes on the Chuo Line and the width of his entire life.

But something is changing underneath, uncurling. Something that has been asleep for thirty years is waking up slowly, the way a limb

wakes up after you've been sitting on it—first the pins and needles, then the ache, then the blood returning, warm and terrifying because it means the limb was always there. He just couldn't feel it.

He lives for the night now. The days at Camp Drake are the sleep. The hours at the bar are the waking. He counts crates and initials forms and waits for the sun to go down the way he used to wait for the hatch to close over the turret—the only difference is the turret was where Eddie went to disappear, and the bar is where she's learning to be seen.

She comes back to Camp Drake at nearly 2am on a Tuesday, boots quiet on the walkway. The barracks hall is dark. She finds her door, turns the handle, steps inside.

The lamp on the nightstand is on.

Walt Calloway is sitting on her bunk. He's leaner now, hair longer, but he sits the way he always did—loose, unhurried, hands on his knees—as if he's been waiting a long time and doesn't mind waiting longer. When the door opens, he looks up.

Eddie stands in the doorway, one hand on the frame, blinking like the room is too bright. Behind her, the dark hallway, the base, the uniform. In front of her, the man who drew the girl.

Her boots squeak when she steps into the room. The rest of her is dead quiet. She's still holding the doorknob like this might be a trick, a dream, a hallucination. Either way, she's pretty sure if she looks away, Walt will disappear.

But he doesn't. "Hey, Eddie," he says.











"THE LAST STRAW"

















