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English IV

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Omaha

Gary Myers huddled miserably against the bulkhead of the amphibious landing craft. The white-capped waves and driving rain tossed his boat like a rowboat in a raging river. In the distance, muffled roars of bombarding guns mixed with the deafening thunder overhead. He had already lost his dinner from the previous night but still felt his stomach crawling up his throat.

“Lieutenant!”

Gary lifted his poncho enough to stare at the pilot. “What’s the matter, Kenny?”

“What’d you say, sir?! You have to shout over these winds!”

Gary shakily stood up and staggered over to the pilot’s box. With every new wave, he used other GI’s as handholds and braces, prompting curses from them. After a minute of wobbling back and forth on the slippery floor, he reached Kenny, who was struggling to maintain control of the frail craft.

“We’re gonna sink in these seas! As much as I like him, General Ike’s bat crazy to invade in this

shitty weather.” Kenny grunted with effort as a sudden wave forced the boat sideways, threatening his grip on the wheel.

 “He’s still the General though. He knows better than all us ground pounders.”

 “Aw, crap! I was afraid you’d say that.” Another grunt of exertion. “If we don’t sink from these gawd awful winds and waves, we’re sure to be sunk by those German guns. I hear they got battalions of snipers and machine gunners just waiting for us to show our little heads.”

 “Look on the bright side a little, Kenny. At least they won’t be able to shoot straight, let alone see us, in this storm.” Myers patted Kenny on the shoulder but a sudden slew of the boat turned it into more of a heavy slap. Embarrassed, he muttered apologies and then stumbled back to his seat, eliciting more grunts of pain from his platoon.

 The warm sunshine, bright blue sky, and sheep-like clouds created a postcard worthy day. This type of weather was rare in the Michigan autumn. Usually, fathers would take their families to the lakeshore for a final day of sunshine and sand before the bitter winter arrived. Today, a somber crowd stood on a wooden train platform, huddled into several groups that each surrounded a young, uniformed man.

 “Gary, are you sure you want to do this?” His mother hung her arms around his neck and cried quietly into his shoulder.

 “Yes, Ma. I’ve thought about this a lot. And I’ve told you already. I can’t have all those innocent people in Europe getting slaughtered when I haven’t tried my best to save them.” Gary hugged his mother tighter, and felt a few tears spill onto the back her flower patterned dress.

 A train whistle shattered their emotional moment.

 “Well, Ma. I guess I better get going.” He stood awkwardly unsure of what to say next.

 Ma let go of her baby boy and gently pushed him in the direction of the train. “You be safe, son. I--” She broke down, sobbing as a vast wave of emotions overwhelmed her. Papa embraced her and stroked her hair.

 “You take real good care of her, Dad. Please.” Gary kissed her on the temple, shook his Dad’s hand, and then ruffled his little siblings’ hair. “And you little rascals. Go easy on your Mama and Papa, alright?”

 They nodded seriously and hugged his legs. After extricating himself, he turned smartly around and marched up the ramp into the passenger car. He could not bring himself to turn around one last time for fear of breaking down like his dear mother.

 Once all the young men had been swallowed by the car, the train whistle screamed and took them away down the tracks. The families watched the train long after it disappeared around the forested bend, but eventually they dragged their feet off the platform and drove away in their Ford jalopies and Chevy sedans.

The Myers were the final inhabitants of the dusty, overly quiet platform. Mama recovered herself to turn around one last time and whisper, “God bless my baby boy. Keep him safe.”

 “Would ya’ look at this. The sun’s comin’ up.” Gary’s second-in-command, Rick, stuck his head above the side of the boat. “And the storm seem to dying as well. Thought it would never end and just dump us with the fishes.”

 Several of the braver GIs followed his example and peered south. A dark haze hovered several miles away.

 “Hey, are those clouds?” one scrawny boy, who looked no older than fifteen, asked.

 Gary looked at what the boy was pointing at. “Those definitely aren’t clouds.” He involuntarily shuddered with anxiety and excitement and fear. “That’s our battlefield.”

 To emphasize his point, several shells screamed over their heads from behind them and landed on Normandy’s coast. Huge clouds of dust and smoke erupted from the beaches and cheers from Gary’s men immediately followed.

“I usually don’t like the swabbies but I’m sure cheerin ‘em on now! Woohoo!”

“Thar ain’t nuthin can live thar. Not even some o’ those huge Texas roaches.”

The first man said, “I second ya’ Tex. It’ll be a walk in the park. Capturin’ the whole o’ France will be easier than takin’ candy fr--” His head exploded.

Chaos ensued. Bullets buzzed by and dented the ship’s prow. Soldiers screamed in panic and dove for whatever thin cover they could find. Nearby explosions drenched their landing craft in foamy seawater.

Gary ducked below the gunwale and shouted over the suffocating noise. “Everyone! Get down! Prepare for battle!” He heard a swarm of bees buzz over his head. He wondered what the noise was until he saw Kenny pitch forward, the windshield riddled with bullets.

The boat veered left as Kenny’s lifeless body turned the wheel. The more vulnerable sides of the boat were immediately punctured by German armor piercing rounds, which shredded the bodies of Gary’s men. Screams of fear turned to shrieks of pain.

Seeing the situation rapidly deteriorate, Gary crawled over to the pilot box, slipping on the blood- and vomit-covered floor. Somehow, he reached it without getting hit. He pulled Kenny’s limp body off the wheel and grabbed it, straightening the swerving boat. Once German fire slackened the tiniest bit, he bravely--or foolishly--peered over the pilot box and straightened the wheel. The first thing he saw made his bladder release.

He yelled four terrifying words at his trembling and torn men. “Mines! Brace for impact!”

Two seconds later, a mine exploded.

 “Get yo’ fat asses out of yo’ beds and start actin’ like real soldiers!” The beet-faced gunny sergeant walked down the bunk hall, banging pots together and shouting at the top of his lungs.

 The cadets bolted up from their pillows, still weary from their long train ride.

“Those Nazis aren’t gonna let you have a nice long beauty sleep!” The sergeant began pulling the slowest men out of their bunks onto the hard, wooden floor. “No, they gonna ambush you in the middle of the night and knife ya’ where you sleep!”

Most of the men started pulling on their khaki uniforms frantically. Gary and several others laid on the ground, still stunned from their falls.

The sergeant walked over and stared at him. “Cadet, what’s yo’ name?”

Gary stood up, knees shaking, and sloppily came to attention. “Gary Myers.”

“Sir!”

“Gary Myers, *sir*!”

“Never, ever forget to call me sir. I am yo’ salvation for the war. Ya’ listen to me, ya’ll survive. Ya’ don’t, ya’ die.” He paused and looked around at the troops around him to emphasize his point. After several seconds, he became satisfied that his cadets understood him and then turned his attention back to unfortunate Gary, who stood mutely in his pajamas. “Now! Cadet Myers, drop and gimme thirty!”

“Sir, yes sir!”

As Gary dropped to the ground, the sergeant pounded over to other sluggish dressers.

He complained under his breath, emphasizing each syllable with a push up. “It’s four thirty in the mornin’ and that effin’ sergeant won’t give us shit.”

His neighbor with a Southern drawl overheard him and spoke while buttoning up his coat. “Oh, this ain’t nuthin’. I woke up ev’ryday at three thirty and rode ten miles to patrol for the roamin’ Injuns that would steal ‘r cattle and women.”

“Don’t you listen to Tex.” Another bunkmate with round eyeglasses and a kind face pulled on his boots. “He loves bragging about how much greater all Texans are than everyone else.” He gently pushed himself in front of Tex.

From behind him, Tex protested, “That’s ‘cause they are.”

The second man ignored Tex. “My name’s Richard but everyone just calls me Rick.” He paused. “If you need any help, I’ve heard all about this from my dad and granpa so ask away. Boot camp’s hard if you don’t know what to expect.”

Gary finished up with his push ups and began dressing. “Nice to meet you Rick.” He pulled a stubborn shoe onto his foot. “Yeah, I don’t know too much. I’m the first one in my family to go army, so I don’t know anything about it.”

“Three things: say sir, do what your told, and don’t stand out. Also, y--” He stopped in mid-sentence as the sergeant stomped over.

“Just what d’ya think yo’r doin’? Ya’ think this is meet and greet?”

Gary, Tex, and Rick replied at the same time. “No, sir.”

He scowled at them as if they were a rotten chunk of meat in a ration box and then yelled at everyone again. “Ok, everyone muster at the flagpole in two minutes for a ten mile run! If anyone is late, we add another two miles!” He stomped out.

“Geez Louise, can he do anything but yell and stomp?” Gary asked as he stood up and put on his poncho.

“All gunnies are angry cause the Army pokes them with a tack right after they’re born, just to make ‘em permanently angry,” Rick said.

Gary laughed at Rick’s cynicism as he walked out into the dark Virginia morning with his new buddy.

 He regained consciousness when he struck the frigid Atlantic water. Bubbles obscured his vision, disorienting him. At the same time, his heavy rucksack filled with a week’s worth of rations and ammunition dragged him closer to the sea floor. He panicked. He flailed his arms about in an attempt to swim or grab onto something. He dropped his rifle and pack and ammo just to stay floating and alive. Just as his weary lungs released the last of his air, his head broke the surface of the sea.

 Gary gasped for breath and tried to orient himself. He paddled furiously, trying not to sink a second time. Nearby, an arm waved and someone cried for help, but they sank below the waves. Gary grimaced; no matter how heart-wrenching others’ situations might be, he was only able save himself. After paddling for ten minutes--though it felt like an eternity, he felt sand under feet.

 “Thank the Lord Jesus,” he whispered and stumbled through the chest deep water.

 However, his relief was short lived. Screams and shots increased in volume and number as he walked forward. Machine guns cut lethal paths through the foaming water, and debris from a hundred wrecked boats clogged his approach. When he reached to brush something from his path, he was horrified to discover that it was a human foot. He screamed, horrified, and shoved it away.

 Gary couldn’t help but wonder if he would end up like that poor man. Would he ever be able to spend clear, sunny days on Lake Michigan again? Or would he ever see Tex and Rich and his other army buddies again? Or would he ever see Mama and Papa and the little ones again? There was so much more he wanted to say and do before he died.

 A mortar shell exploding fifty feet to the left interrupted his somber reverie. Burning shrapnel showered him, thunking against his helmet. The force of the blast left his ears ringing and sight fuzzy. Not deterred, he waded forward through the water and soon joined other soldiers that cautiously crawled out of the surf.

Gary looked in front of him and saw a hellish nightmare. Tanks and boats burned fiercely on the sand while clogged the morning air with black, oily smoke. Lines of fire from the Germans high on the beach’s bluffs carved through the waves and the advancing Americans. So many men fell, the surf turned a slight pink. Nimble American fighters strafed the bluffs while graceful bombers high overhead rained death upon targets further inland.

“Go, Go, Go, Go!” A beachmaster waved the oncoming soldiers forward. “Clear the beaches! Make room for more supplies on Omaha!”

Gary’s calves and arms felt like lead but he dutifully stumbled onward. In the final ten feet, the men on both sides on him fell. One writhed on the ground and screamed in agony while the other curled up, clutching his stomach, and sobbed for his mother.

He stopped and almost knelt down to help the sobbing one but another stream of bullets sliced the sand between them. Gary sprinted forward to the meager shelter of the sea wall.

As he lay down against the wall, he looked back to the two men just in time to see their bodies lurch from another burst of bullets and become still. Gary lost control of his emotions and started sobbing.

“I could’ve saved them.” He pressed himself against the low wall even tighter and prayed, “Oh Lord, please forgive me!”

“Ya’ have to put th’ butt of the gun right in yo’ shoulder. Like this, see?” The gunny sergeant placed the end of the gun between his collarbone and shoulder. “There’s a nice li’l gap there, almost like God wanted us to shoot Nazis.”

Gary and Rick and the rest of the cadets copied the sergeant’s movements.

“To aim, ya’ match the middle knob on th’ barrel with th’ far one. It should fit right between the far sight.”

Rick whispered, “Just like kicking a football through posts.”

Gary whispered back while still copying the instructor. “You play at all?” He loaded the chamber of the gun.

“Yeah, won the league twice in high school. Not good enough for the big colleges though.” Rick pulled the bolt back. “How about you?”

“Still in high school. Running back. We’re small so we don’t do too well in our league.” As Rick opened his mouth to reply, Gary put a finger to his lips. “Wait, this looks important.”

“Now when I say fire, ya’ line ya’ eye up ‘til the dummy’s chest is in the sights.” The sergeant raised his gun to his shoulder and pointed it at the straw dummy with a swastika painted on it. “Slowly breath out and...” The rifle’s report echoed from the nearby trees, causing several cadets to jump. Straw burst out from the dummy’s chest thirty yards down range.

“Y'all's turn now! Anyone get all ten in a row and they get off KP tonight! Commence firing!” The sergeant stepped back as the cadets aimed downrange.

The shooting range was filled with sharp cracks from rifles and deep thumps from bullets hitting their targets. The sergeant walked down the shooting line, criticizing sloppy forms. He stopped when he reached Gary and put his hands on his hips.

“*Uh-oh, I messed up again*,” Gary thought. “*Wonder what he’s gonna yell this time.*” He fired again, hitting the dummy right in the center of the head.

“Cadet Myers….” He paused. “Ya’ may be one o’ th’ best shooters that’s come through here. There may actually be something promising about ya’.”

Surprised, Gary couldn’t speak for several seconds. Finally, he stammered “Uh, thank you, uh, sir.”

“Ya’ darned welcome, Myers. I don’t say that lightly.” He turned about sharply and stomped down the line.

Rick nudged Gary. “Looks like Sarge has finally taken a liken’ to you.”

A sheepish grin split Gary’s grimy face. “Aw shaddup. We still got a long way before we’re soldiers and a lot can go wrong before then.”

Gary spent the next hour huddled in misery and fear against the cold, concrete seawall. More and more troops waded ashore, but it seemed like at least half of them were cut down by the withering German fire. Limp and twisted bodies lay on the sand or floated gently back and forth on the pink surf.

Gary felt like he could do nothing. If he stood up, he would be shot. He had already seen several men try to go over the wall only to fall back lifeless. “*This whole invasion is doomed. I’m gonna die here on this godforsaken stretch of French beach,*” Gary thought. He started crying in fear and hopelessness.

A man with a leathered face crawled next to him. “What’s your name, Lieutenant?”

“Gary Meyers.” He saw a star on each of the man’s shoulders and added, “Sir.”

“General Norman Cota.” He ducked as sand and bits of concrete rained down from a nearby blast. “I need you to climb those bluffs and help root out all those stubborn Germans. We need to clear Omaha for all the supply ships coming in this afternoon.”

“No offense, sir, but that’s suicide. I’ve seen a dozen men fail to go over the wall, let alone go up the cliffs.”

“None taken. We just blew a twenty yard stretch of wall so mass charges are easier.” He brushed concrete dust off his helmet. “In five minutes, I’m gonna fire a flare and that’ll be a signal to charge through the breach. Got that Lieutenant?”

“Sir, yes sir!”

“Good, now go find yourself a gun from one of these bodies.” He smiled grimly. “They won’t be needing it anymore.” Cota crawled down the sea wall, looking for more able bodied soldiers.

Gary watched his new commander for a few seconds and then began searching for a rifle and some ammo. He had to worm painfully slowly to every new body to avoid German attention. After two minutes, he reached the first body; it had nothing of value except a canteen of water which he greedily guzzled.

Luck favored him at the second corpse. A rifle identical to his lay in perfect condition

next to it and clips spilled out of the dead man’s rucksack. He grabbed up the supplies and stuffed the clips in his pockets and then crawled towards the smoke that Cota had pointed to.

 The bright orange flare rocketed through the smoke closest to the breach.

A huge number of men--more than Gary thought could survive on Omaha--rose up from the cratered beach and charged forward, firing their rifles, pistols, and machine guns. Before fifty men could make it through the breach, German fire intensified and focused on the sprinting men, cutting them down like a scythe through grass. However, the American momentum was unstoppable.

Gary was so terrified his knees were shaking and was only able to continue on because the excitement of the charge swept him forward. Fewer and fewer soldiers ran alongside him up the ravine. At the top, the German fire slackened to a few scattered rifle shots, so he stopped, exhausted, and sat against a shattered stump.

“Lieutenant!”

Gary looked at the speaker and saw General Cota lying in a nearby shell hole. “Yes, General?”

“There’s a machine gun nest just over that knoll.” Cota pointed at a low rise. “Our planes destroyed it pretty good but I need you to check for any Germans. There shouldn’t be any though.” He started to rise, ducked as a mortar shell whined overhead, and flinched as it exploded on the beach below.

Gary replied instinctively. “Sir, yes sir.”

“Good luck lieutenant,” Cota said, and then rose again and ran further inland to organize more soldiers.

Gary sat numbly, daunted by his mission and shocked by his tremendous ordeal. Knowing that if he didn’t move soon, he wouldn’t complete his task at all, Gary rallied his remaining strength and ran from his meager cover.

Once he reached the summit of the low hill, a bullet ripped a hole through his collar, causing him to drop down on his belly and worm into small crater. He shot over the lip, firing blindly at the machine gun nest. Once he was out of ammo, he tried to load his gun, but his hands were shaking so badly that he couldn’t even fit the next clip into the slot.

After a minute of futile attempts, he put the clip between his knees and shoved the gun on top of it and succeeded on the second try. A “V” of bombers soared overhead like graceful birds, destined for targets farther inland. Gary stared at them in admiration and envy, wishing he could be safe from enemy fire instead of assaulting a machine gun nest.

“*C’mon, Gary*.” He psyched himself up. “*Stop complaining. They probably have just as rough as you when the German AA guns open fire.*” He crouched and prepared to charge out from his shelter. “*All you gotta do is charge, fire your gun and check for any Germans. If there are any, they’ll already be wounded. You’ll be fine.*”

He breathed deeply, gathered his legs under him, and jumped out of his hole. As soon as he came out, he stared straight into the eyes of young, blond German soldier guarding the entrance.

A crimson cut split the soldier’s--the boy, really--cheek from ear to lips. Mud and fine powder covered his tattered uniform, and he wore the same expression as Gary: shock mixed with fear and adrenaline.

For a split second, the two young men stared at each other, surprised into motionless, but then raised their guns to their shoulders and fired.

Gary immediately knew his aim was off because the butt of his rifle was not centered properly on his shoulder. He shot at his opponent again and again and only stopped when clicks followed each trigger pull. He saw the boy topple to his knees and fall face first to the hard, rocky soil. The scene reminded him of a Hollywood war comedy he saw back home, and he started laughing for some strange reason, drunk with fear and relief.

However, his body was wracked with pain when he inhaled again. He looked down. Crimson blood rapidly spread across his brown, wool shirt from three small holes. Knowing he needed medical assistance immediately, he retraced his route, stumbling and gasping. His breaths came shorter and faster, and his knees started giving way. His final strength gave out at the top of the knoll, and he, too, sank to his knees.

“Medic.” He tried to shout for help but the best he could manage was a loud whisper. “Please help.”

He toppled forward.

“You’re gonna be just fine, uhh, Lieutenant Myers.” A pretty young nurse with a Georgian accent and a Red Cross apron scanned a clipboard. “Some of your buddies found you and brought you here in the nick o’ time.”

Gary tried to sit up in his hospital bed and grunted in pain.

“Oh, I wouldn’t try that, hon. Your insides are quite a mess right now.” She put the clipboard down and started putting several liquids into a large needle.

He groaned. “It feels like someone pulled them out, minced them, then shoved them back in.”

“Taking three bullets to the gut’ll do that to you, sweetie.” She smiled, showing her pearly white teeth, and held up a large needle. “This’ll help fight infections. Army hospitals are quite unsanitary, y’know.” She stabbed him in the shoulder.

He noticed his eyes were losing focus. His head fell back to his pillow.

“Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you. Morphine’ll make you sleep in no time.” She patted his cheek lightly. “Sleep tight, young hero.”

“Wait, one more thing.” His words slurred together.

“What?”

“What were the names of the people who brought me in?” His head lolled to one side and eyes closed against his will.

“Lemme see…. I think their names were Tex and, uh, Rob or Richard or somethin’ like that.”

The corners of Gary’s mouth twitched upward--almost imperceptibly--as he lost consciousness.