

Evan stepped out of the car and walked to the office where his career would end.

"Evan, sit down. It's come to my attention—"

"The book."

"Yes."

Evan had placed advertisements in newspapers throughout the country. Soon, boxes began to arrive at his door. The boxes contained journals, postcards, letters. The passages in question had been reworked from a diary sent by a soldier's widow. It seemed safe to absorb and use the material as necessary, only, as the dean just now said, "Why in the hell didn't you attribute those quotes?"

Attribute them to what, the diary of some guy in Alabama? His name won't mean anything to you but, okay, it's Lou Jenkins. Found underneath a broken ironing board by Henrietta Jenkins. Reworded by Evan Persails, sorcerer.

They were the thieves, the dead men stealing his time as he turned their scribbles literary. He made a historical record despite their thousand mile stares and the thousand times their wives said, "He doesn't talk about the war. Leave him be."

"I'm a coward," Evan was going to admit, "who documents war. How can I imagine, much less render, what I can't imagine having done myself? What I can't even imagine in colour? If I didn't attribute, it was because I tended, amended, appended, upended. Those words were not what they were when I started. No one points to Eli Whitney and says, 'You didn't make the cotton itself, did you?'"

"I want you to go away, Evan," the dean said. "Take some time. You seem to have lost your bearings. It's all politics, from here out. No one's accusing you of plagiarism yet, but your books are popular. It depends what happens in the media. Then we'll know. Besides—"

"What?" Evan asked in the exact manner of his niece, who despised his attempts to grasp her, and if looked at for longer than a second always harshly said, "What?"

"We're both a little tired," the dean said.

"I'm not tired at all."

"Your eyes are tired. It's summertime. You have no classes. Call me in August."

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It was 1972 on the Holiday Inn dance floor. Evan had taken his date there because that's where Gloria liked to go. There was a mirrored disco ball and a fully stocked bar.

Before Evan had danced a second song with Gloria, a man, *some guy*, approached. Evan let go and watched her twirl into the guy's arms like it was "Singing in the Rain".

The guy couldn't dance, but Gloria thought he could. They danced for ten minutes, time enough for Evan to drink two beers. Finally, Gloria walked up to him and said, "Sorry." Then she took off with the other guy. The new guy smiled.

That was Evan's chance. The men whose battles he recorded would have punched that son of a bitch right in the balls and carried Gloria off in their arms. Later, she would write the author who recorded her dead husband's battles: "My dear husband fought long and hard for his country, and for you to just take his words and use them without proper acknowledgment is a cowardly thing to do."

Yes.

* * *

He sat in the water. The minnows gathered at his feet and looked at him dumbly, as if waiting for him to stomp his way to the beach and kill.

He had planned the return trip for years. It was a trip he should have taken many times. He had stopped at the Normandy beach once before but only for a few hours. He hadn't been able to grasp the past. He knew he should study the landscape, walk the beaches, dip his hands in the water where the blood ran, let his shoes fill with the sand that sank boots.

He stood there but could not grasp. There was a fortress. They must have climbed over the hill, one falling, the next pushing higher. Above, birds must have flown, wondering what the racket was all about. Minnows like the ones whipping around his feet may have grasped that something was wrong, the water thickening with dirt and blood, organs, shreds of cloth, buttons, bullets, zippers, fingers, legs.

If he had been there, he would have taken his pre-invasion shore leave and kissed women with lipstick the colour of plums. He would have danced to big band music. When he returned to the war and crawled out of his Higgins boat, he would have seen something that looked like this beach, except worse.

But Evan's shoes were not ground in the same sand, and he did not look up at the same sky. It had all been switched. It was a trick. He was on some other planet. He was in a Twilight Zone episode. Any minute now, Ernest Borgnine would stroll down the hill, salute, and say, "Evan Persails? But you're dead ... aren't you?"

Looking at the water around his shoes, Evan thought of dying men. He imagined them thrusting pens at him, stabbing his legs, pointing them like rifles or throwing them like grenades.

Who could blame them, he thought. Who could blame their widows?

* * *

One month later his niece met him at the airport around midnight.

"Mom says the dean called. He told her he couldn't get a hold of you and we were the only other Persails in the book. Said something about the university dropping what he called 'the matter'. Said you can come back whenever—"

He was going to tell her he could not grasp this information. He wanted to say he wasn't going back, that there were things about him she couldn't understand, just as there were things about her he couldn't understand. He swore the airport went black and white for a moment, that he was at the end of a movie about a failed man. She would say something that would reach deep into him and change his mind, renew and redeem him, and then the credits would roll. But she stared at him with minnow eyes.

"What?" he said.

"I'll just take you home now."

"No, take me to a bar, any bar. You're twenty-one, right?"

"Twenty-two."

She drove him to the nearest airport bar, one where she knew the pilots and stewardesses congregated. She took him there not for his sake but hers, though he could not have chosen a better place himself.

They sat at the bar drinking, the niece a glass of wine and Evan straight scotch. The music was the same as that at most dive bars, and so he wasn't surprised when "Mustang Sally" came over the jukebox. He watched a man in uniform, no doubt a pilot, grab the hand of a uniformed woman, no doubt a stewardess. Both drunk, they started dancing, though there was no dance floor, only the space between tables. This, Evan thought, explained some of the turbulence he had experienced on morning flights.

He waited, then approached the couple, his niece staring the other direction, chin on palm.

"Do you mind?" he said, touching the pilot's shoulder.

"Mind what?"

"Mind if I cut in."

"Cut in? What do you think this is, 1944? Get the fuck out of here."

He pushed Evan back. The niece approached but stayed back several feet.

"What's going on?" she said. "Leave him alone."

"He's trying to—I don't know what he's trying to do."

"I'm trying to fuck your girlfriend," Evan said.

"Uncle?" his niece said. "Let's go. We're going home right now."

Evan swung at the pilot but missed. His intended target moved out of the way. Physics sent Evan to the floor, much as history had been doing for years. The pilot and stewardess watched while the niece helped Evan to his feet.

"What the hell were you doing?" she said on the drive home. "That was a total embarrassment. You acted like a teenager."

"But did you see the way I swung?"

"You didn't hit anything. You missed the air."

"But I meant it. I meant to hit him."

"I'm glad you're proud of it. It was very brave of you."

"Yes," he said, thinking.