

Sam Halpert

The Best Day I Ever Had

Barney was my best friend. A real good natured kid you knew you could depend on. Always agreeable, never complained about a thing, and didn't have to be asked twice for a favor. Once we went over to the Batavia fairgrounds and I took off like a real chump after some chick who had acted friendly in the ticket line. She and I had a lot of fun on the rides, and I won her a panda and a couple of rings and bracelets at the game stands. We got around to some smooching in the haunted house and up on the Ferris wheel, but it turned out she was just killing time with me until her boy friend knocked off work at the feed mill. When I caught up with Barney later, he didn't stick it to me like you know most guys would. I'd blown my last cent on that tomato, but he never razzed me once. And though he had enough left over for bus fare home, he didn't have enough for both of us, but he stuck with me and didn't act the least bit sore as we stood there in the dark roadside, our thumbs poking holes in the chilly evening damp fog as we watched headlights come and go.

This goes back a long ways, before the war, back to when we were both kids, jerking sodas in a drug store, trying to work our way through our first year at a rinkydink teacher's college up in western New York. It could get pretty busy behind the fountain at times, especially when the movie house down the street let out, or after the bingo or when they had a dance at the Legion. The place would fill up in no time at all, and we'd be in up to our armpits scooping that damn ice cream, which to this day I still can't even look at, let alone eat it.

When it wasn't busy, we'd deliver prescriptions, or make a pass at dusting all the boxes and bottles lining the shelves, but mostly we'd clown around, goofing off in back, trying to get a rise out of old Connie, the pharmacist, driving her batty with our questions about sex and birth control. She was about thirty-five, unmarried, on the heavy side, and plain as rocks. We once heard some jerks at school calling her Tugboat Annie, until Barney got on them to button it up. Her father, a mean, chinchy old loud-mouth owned the store, and made life miserable for Connie, and for anyone who came near him. She, though, was a decent woman, true blue, and did her best to overlook our shenanigans, just as we'd make out we didn't notice when she'd slip into the storeroom for a few nips of her tonic she loaded with a

stiff slug of morphine each morning.

There's a window near my bed here, only it isn't a real window. Just a piece of thick glass that doesn't open or shut. That's what they call construction these days. The a.c. breaks down, and we'll all be in deep shit. Outside the sky is gray-yellow, not much blue up there, with the sun poking in and out behind clouds looking like clumps of old rusted steel wool. A stiff wind blows down half empty streets, swirling tattered sheets of newspapers flat against door fronts of vacant stores. You don't catch them writing too many songs about April in Ohio. At night, car headlights from the Interstate splash off the splintered windows of all those grime coated abandoned factories. I'm not complaining, you understand. It's OK with me. They didn't take me in and hang me out to dry, so I'd admire the view from here.

The time I'm talking about, Barney and I were about the only ones left when the college shut down for Thanksgiving recess. I had no wish to go home, since my mother had married this new guy I just couldn't stand. Barney must not have had it any too good at home either, or maybe he had his own reasons for staying, but it sure doesn't matter much now. All I know is for once we had one swell time of it. Sleeping late, no classes, no schedules, and the whole campus pretty much to ourselves. It was a spectacular Fall that year. Warm sunshiny days and clear cool nights—up to our ass in red and gold leaves dropped from all those oaks and elms around town. We got out an old football, and Barney was Slingin' Sammy Baugh tossing me down and out, as we ran up and down the campus for hours. Later we'd guzzle a few beers, and bullshit the time away. Nothing on our minds but who we'd pick first—Dizzy Dean or Bob Feller, Otto Graham or Sid Luckman, and who'd we want for girl friend—Lana Turner, Betty Grable, or Hedy Lamarr. We sat through double features at both movie houses in town, and watched the bombing of England in the Fox Movietone News. We all booed when they showed Hitler and Stalin and Mussolini. Roosevelt caught it even worse when he came on. Everyone knew he was trying to drag us into the war.

Connie at the drug store was kind enough to invite Barney and I over to Thanksgiving dinner. She baked a wonderful turkey with all the fixings, and it all would have been a wonderful day except her dear old dad about ruined it all with his constant griping and belittling of her, and his dirty jokes about the old maid and the traveling salesman. Connie made out like it didn't bother her, but I saw her stealing off to the pantry for a few pulls of her tonic. No matter how rude he was to her, she never answered back, while she did her best to keep things halfway sociable. Barney tried everything he could to cheer her up, even asked her to the pictures with us after dinner. I could tell she was dying to, but then she begged off. She just

couldn't leave her dad alone on Thanksgiving.

About a week and a half later, on a slow Sunday afternoon with not much happening, Barney and I were kidding around behind the fountain, juggling glasses and tossing plates around until I saw Connie walking over to us looking none too happy. We cut out the horseplay and shifted into polishing the big coffee urn and wiping the counter. She was truly upset, close to tears, the way she'd get all those times when her father bawled her out in front of us for no reason at all, growling at her that he'd be better off with an imbecile from the state asylum.

Barney poured her a cup of coffee. She gripped the cup with both hands to hold it steady and said I just can't believe it. It's awful, horrible. It just came over the radio. The Japs have bombed our fleet in Hawaii, Pearl Harbor. Hell, they can't do that, said Barney.

I had it all figured out and said those snakes will probably apologize, bow down and tell us it's all just a big mistake, so sorry, and it'll be brushed under the carpet like nothing happened, you'll see. Connie looked like she was about to cry. I don't know, she said, the radio says in all likelihood this means war.

Take it easy, Connie, Barney said, could be just another one of those phony broadcasts like they had about the invaders from Mars, trying to scare us again. He whipped up a double Bromo for her, but she had slipped off for her backroom tonic by then. We stuck close to the radio listening to the latest news flashes, trying to make some sense out of it all. The reports grew worse, and we hung around even after our time was up, listening to the commentators contradict each other, but by dinner time it had become clear to us, that as Americans, we had no choice but to teach those sneaky Jap bastards a lesson for pulling this attack on Uncle Sam. Barney was all for us joining up with the paratroops.

Watch me, he said, jumping up on the counter. Geronimo! He jerked the ripcord and lifted his arms to control the chute, easing himself earthward. Meanwhile I stretched my arms out like wings, made engine noises through my lips, and banked into a turn. I was nuts over aviation movies, and had dreamed of being a pilot ever since I was a kid.

Let's flip for it, I said, paratroops or Air Corps. Barney pulled out his lucky half-dollar blowing on it and rubbing it between his palms. Come on paratroops, he said, then tossed it up.

Heads, I said. It came up tails. Two out of three, I said, and Barney gave me a look before saying, O.K., all right, just to keep peace in the family. No more changes though.

Nah, forget it, I said, you won fair and square. It's the paratroops for us all the way.

Just flip it, Barney said, your turn. I knew right then and there I was

dead wrong, that I shouldn't have done it, but I flipped that lucky coin of his anyway. The next two tosses fell my way. That settled it. We shook hands, and decided to take the first bus in the morning into Buffalo. By God, we were going to enlist in the U.S. Army Air Corps.

Don't bother to ask me how long I've been here. I couldn't begin to tell you for the life of me. Or when they'll discharge me. I could ask the night nurse—the wacky, skinny one with the wild black hair and a ton and a half of makeup. I call her Madonna, and she just eats it up.. A real pip, she is. Last night she checks my pulse then hovers over me to make sure I take all the goddam pills. She bends over and then slaps my hand away and tells me, now stop that, a man of your age, etc. Then she looks at the chart at the foot of the bed, and gives me aren't we doing just fine today. She looks at my tray and clucks that we shouldn't be wasting any of this perfectly wholesome food, and we have to build up our strength if we expect to be discharged soon. I'm tempted to tell her how often we've been in and out of these places, and how we were once dry for nearly six years, and what would really build me up right now is maybe a fifth of Seagram's. Actually, I'll bet she knows more about me than I care to remember. Not too many secrets in the ward of a V.A. hospital, and as she often tells us, this isn't the Betty Ford clinic, you know.

When Connie came out of the storeroom, we told her about our decision to join up. She stood perfectly still for a moment. Only her eyes moved, as they glided over Barney and me and back again. Then she snapped out of it, and before wrapping her arms around me, popped a few clove leaves into her mouth, but I still caught the dank odor of morphine as she drenched my cheek with a soggy kiss. Then she made a grab for Barney, who was so lost in the clouds that he failed to take evasive action until too late. God bless and protect you boys, she said, beaming and trying to hold back her tears. She finally released him and went back to the storeroom, returning a few minutes later with a square of cardboard on which she had crayonned in large red letters CLOSED – NATIONAL EMERGENCY. She put the sign in the door, locked up, and pulled down the shades. Then she handed us each a five dollar bill from the cash register along with our week's pay which wasn't due until Friday. Dad'll hemorrhage when he finds out about this, she said. We turned down the money at first. She shrugged off our weak protests, and told us to make ourselves comfortable in a booth, while she mixed us up a drink. We turned up the radio and heard the local disc jockey blowing his top every five minutes, as he kept breaking into his recorded Starlight Ballroom of the Stars with more of the latest news bulletins hot off the wire. Connie brought us our drinks, lifted her glass and proposed a toast to her dear young heroes. She leaned over to lay another kiss on Barney, who smoothly ducked it this time with

hey, this is great stuff, Connie. What are we drinking here?

Connie's concoction, she said, sarsaparilla and 100% U.S.P. grain alcohol. This is a party you're bound to remember a long, long time. Well, ol' Connie was right on the money there. I can still remember it all right. That was my first drunk, and they didn't run the Jack Benny show that night.

I don't know how nurses put up with it, taking all that crap from doctors and patients and everyone else around without letting on it bothers them. And all the time, they're the ones who care and get the job done. Like Madonna. Sure, they're not all exactly saints, but if it weren't for them, I'd have been a goner long ago, for all that anyone gives a good goddam. The doctors around here are like doctors everywhere, thinking they're holy lords of the universe. They hammer away at me how they can help only if I co-operate. Like they've hit on some kind of major medical breakthrough that will keep me dry. They tell me how it would help if I tried to keep in touch with old friends and family. Forget it, I tell them. Madonna says they're trying to contact my computer guru son in our nation's capital to come up for a visit. Lots of luck, guys.

The whole country came to a grinding halt next morning while we all hung glued to the radio for FDR's speech about the day of infamy, and how a state of war existed between us and the empire of Japan. Everything was all tied up, and our bus couldn't pull into Buffalo until one-thirty, and by then they had one hell of a mob at the Customs House where all the recruiting was going on. We finally found the line for the Air Corps, three or four deep, winding clear down the stairway and out into the street on a cloudy December day with an Arctic wind knifing across Lake Erie straight from the Pole. We didn't have wind-chill factors then, but each frigid blast struck clear down to the bone, giving us a solid whiff of the stockyards, and the old Iroquois brewery, and the big paint factory over in Black Rock. The line hardly moved for the next few hours, and then a uniform came out and announced they couldn't process any more of us today. Come back tomorrow.

Barney and I stayed overnight at the old Y on Seneca Street, rushing back next morning at seven to be up front in line, freezing our asses off. They finally let us in and it was mass confusion. We went around from room to room, filling out whatever forms were handed to us. Then we undressed and dressed a dozen times while they weighed and measured us, checked us out to see if we could touch our nose and toes, and if we had bad dreams, and if we liked girls. A medic had us milk it down while he examined for signs of V.D. and one of the kids grew a boner. We all bust out laughing when that medic slammed down on it with three stiff fingers, and the air went out of it like a puncture.

Around four o'clock they rounded up about twenty of us for a swear-

ing in ceremony to be photographed for the Courier-Express. Now we were getting somewhere. I saw us on the flight line in our leather jackets, helmets, and white silk scarves, climbing into our P-38 Lockheed Lightnings. Erroll Flynn and Tyrone Power, Barney and I, the sky avengers. The photographer's flash went off as we were sworn into the service by a fleshy little warrant officer. We were milling around and mumbling, wondering what next, when he climbed up on a desk and announced that we were now officially in for the duration of the war plus six months, and to report back in two days at 9 AM with toothbrush, razor, and clean underwear.

Wednesdays here, we get Walter, a tall, thin, red-headed guy with an Adam's apple you could hang your coat on, and rain or shine never takes off his green sunglasses. He's from the local community college, very patient, working with seven or eight of us shaking rummies, trying to get us to write our life stories. His latest assignment for us is to recall a happy experience from our past, like maybe a favorite day. Some of our more sensitive scholars stared bug-eyed at him for a while before starting to twitch like these rap dancers. Me, I don't care one way or the other. Hell, it's only so many words on paper. Who's going to bother to read it anyway?

Once we were sworn in, we figured maybe we'd better call home to let them know, so they could be proud. Barney's mother lived alone and worked in the Utica post office ever since his father was laid up with some kind of lung disease problem in the county sanitarium. My father had run out on my mother and me when I was eight, and we never heard from him again. She later on married that shithead I just never could get along with. I must have caught her at a bad time. I called collect, and I could overhear him bitching about it when she answered. She didn't take the news anything like I expected. She got emotional and all, and it ended up with her saying what could she expect, like father like son, no consideration ever at all for her feelings, she would never forgive me for doing this to her, and then she began crying. I heard the guy bitch some more, shouting at her to hang up or he'd rip the fucking phone off the wall, then I heard some commotion and yelling like he was smacking her around, and then the dial tone.

Two years later when all the flying I was doing was with a Sherman tank repair unit in Sicily, a guy from the Red Cross notified me she had drowned in that fluke ferry accident they had in Chester, Pa. I never found out what she was doing there.

They have their screwups here like in all these places, but most of the staff do their best, dosing me with all kinds of pills and medication, and forcing three meals a day on me, although I can hardly taste a thing through all the coffee and cigarettes. Two packs a day easy, maybe more. I listen to them dishing out the old line about one day at a time and first things first.

You know, think positive and keep busy with their occupational therapy and all. I do as I'm told. How much TV can you watch anyway? I attend their A.A. meetings and put in my time in the wood shop, where if I don't soon lose a couple of fingers turning out those damn candlesticks, it'll be a holy miracle. Just another member of the greatest generation, ha ha.

We were disappointed with the two day delay after the swearing in, but at least it would give us a little time to say goodbye to the kids back at school. And we still had some of the money Connie gave us, so we decided to have a night on the town before the last bus back. Night on the town for us was twenty cents fish fries, nickel beers and free peanuts at Rudy's, down on Niagara Street.

We knew one of the waitresses there, Leatrice, from school. She was a real nice kid, not what you'd call a beauty, but she had a great build and a peachy disposition, always pleasant. Barney had dated her until she had to drop out of school when the Pierce-Arrow shut down and they laid off her father. It was temporary, she said, she'd come back soon as he landed another job.

Leatrice was busy, scooting around ankle deep in peanut shucks with a loaded tray, but she was happy to see us, and even stood us to a few beers off the tab when we told her we had just signed up for the duration. She had a thing for Barney and I knew he went for her too, so I let them alone when she got another waitress to cover her for ten minutes. When she had to go back to work, Leatrice gave him her high school graduation picture and he gave her his school I.D. card. She cut the picture out of the I.D. to fit in her locket, and then gave him one hell of a kiss goodbye. He looked embarrassed. Leatrice kissed me too, not the same way, and made me promise to please take care of him. I told her, O.K. sure. Connie had asked the same promise.

We hustled over to the Palace before the evening prices went up. The tall barker in the general's uniform stood outside announcing through his megaphone that for one week only the Palace was proud to feature the triumphant return of Georgia Southern and her Treasure Chest along with Lovely Lillian St. Claire accompanied by her Doves of Love. A strong wind carried his hoarse voice clear up the block. Even so, the place was nearly empty, it being the early show on a Tuesday night.

From where we sat, Lillian looked heavier and older and no way near as beautiful as she did in the posters outside. Three of her pigeons ignored her and just waddled around the stage, so she had to work with only two Doves of Love. We watched spellbound though, as those two circled about her, pecking off bits of her goddess costume one by one.

We laughed our sides off as the guy with the cane and straw hat pulled dirty tricks on the hobo. As part of their act, the most beautiful girl I've ever

seen to this very day strutted slowly across the stage. She didn't have a stitch on, completely nude with only her long golden hair covering her business. She didn't say a word, and though the two comics pretended she wasn't even there, I can still remember her.

Then even the five bored musicians in the orchestra looked up when Georgia pranced on the dark ultra-violet lit stage with her boobs twirling those shiny bright tassels like B-25 twin propellers. For a minute there, I thought she was about to take off and zoom up to the balcony. Barney's big hands exploded applause like firecrackers, only he never could keep time. This threw poor Georgia off for a few beats, but she was a star, and was soon back in step with those tassels spinning again, clockwise and counter-clockwise. We screeched and jumped in our seats like a pair of mad apes. The guys in the band were really into it now, and our cheers bounced off the walls of that raunchy joint, with old Georgia twirling, bumping, grinding, and us hooting, clapping, shouting, and some weird geek three rows down near the wall steadily flogging away under his raincoat, lost in the pounding rhythm of it all.

It was snowing hard when we left the burlesque, with nobody on the streets but us. We ran and threw snowballs at lamp posts and the sides of trucks, just to hear them thwack. The air was clear, cold and biting, and we were fully charged. My buddy and I were on our way to soon becoming U.S. of A. sky avengers. I had a good buzz on from my beers at Rudy's, and Barney was goofy in love. He took Leatrice's picture out of his wallet, held it to his heart, and said that there was a girl who made a guy proud to be American. We howled. We sang *Off We Go Into The Wild Blue Yonder*. The snow stopped and the clouds parted like the blue curtain at the Palace. We peeled off our coats and danced under the Christmas decorations and lights in deserted McKinley Square, our hands clasped behind our heads, staring up through the freezing night air at the steely stars. Millions of them. Barney was a real whiz kid and could name them all. He showed me how the North Star was always half way between the Dipper and Cassiopeia, and how the belt of Orion led to Sirius, the brightest star in the sky, then he pointed out the twins, Castor and Pollux. God, they were all bright that night.

We howled some more. We threw snowball grenades blowing up Jap positions all around us, and torpedoed every enemy aircraft carrier in sight. We roared *Nothing Can Stop The Army Air Corps*, while pissing our initials in the snow. We pushed, shoved, wrestled and tried to hold on to each other, but kept slipping and sliding, falling and laughing all the way down the hilly, icy sidewalk to the bus terminal. While waiting for the bus to pull in, Barney said that this was surely the best day we ever had. I told him that he could say that again, and he did.

After all that hooting, shouting, and horsing around, it seemed doubly quiet as we sat in the dark, in back of the smelly bus going back that night. We told knock-knock jokes for a while, and then I asked Barney what his mom had said when he phoned to tell her he'd signed up. He didn't answer right off, but then he said oh, not much, after a while she started crying.

That's funny, I said, so did mine.

I leaned back and tried to catch a nap, but I was still too charged up. It had been one hell of a day for us. Barney bummed a cigarette from a fat old guy sitting nearby, who after he found out we had just enlisted, couldn't stop going on and on about his great, wonderful days at Fort Niagara during the last war. It was a long ride.

Two days later, we waited for the same bus in the chilly December morning darkness with nothing in our ditty bags but clean underwear and a gift-wrapped razor set and toothbrush from good old Connie who came down at the last minute to see us off. She told us we'd be in her prayers every day and to please be careful. She hoped we wouldn't forget her.

There must have been about two hundred of us reporting that morning in Buffalo where we were greeted by the mayor and his cronies in their top hats, full dress suits and red sashes, along with the combined bands of the sanitation and fire departments. They did their best to line us up to parade with them down to the old Lackawanna train depot. You can bet that didn't work out too well. Some of the boys were so eager, they broke out into a run, and soon we were all in a wild race, running and yelling like kids in a playground, ignoring the whistles and curses of the few uniformed troopers in charge.

It took some time, but they finally got us to settle down at the station, where they loaded us on to the waiting long, dark brown and green cars of the troop train. Barney and I tried to stick together, but had to split up when they assigned us to different cars.

I swear that train must have made fifty stops on the way south, pulling into sidings as it took on and dropped off cars on the long weary trip down through bleak December farmland and the rusted steel mill towns of Ohio and West Virginia. We were stuck for hours at the big stations like Cincinnati and Nashville, where the boys would go nuts over the few Red Cross girls passing out the doughnuts and coffee.

I tried a dozen different ways to slip out to find Barney somewhere on that train, but I couldn't get past the M.P's who made sure we stayed in our assigned cars. I thought I saw him once, when we did calisthenics in a pasture while the train stopped to take on water, but they wouldn't let us break ranks then either. I was sure I'd catch up with him sooner or later.

I look out of this thing they call a window. I don't know what the hell I'm looking for. There's not a damn thing worth seeing out there anyhow.

Its like they passed a law when we weren't looking that changed the old good stuff we had into all this shit floating around these days. Hell, there aren't even any stars up there anymore. Yet in my mind I can still see Barney's barrel chest and long dangling arms, and how he popped out of his clothes that always looked tight and short on him, and the goofy way he bounced when he walked as if his knees were buckling under him, and the crew cuts we gave each other. I remember how much he wanted to have a car some day. What I can't see is his face, no matter how hard I try. That's gone. Dead and gone for the real duration, and no one left to remember unless somewhere out in this great land of ours, good old Leatrice is still keeping him safe and warm in her locket. I can still see Connie waving goodbye at the bus-stop and asking us not to forget her, and that Sunday afternoon when she gave us the word on Pearl Harbor, and Barney up on the soda counter yelling Geronimo, and that damn two out of three coin toss I pulled on the best friend a guy ever had in this world. I can still see that.

The train rolled on hour after boring hour, and we learned to get used to those back-breaking bumps when they'd uncouple some cars at a small southern town siding, though there was one jolt that made me sit up right in the middle of the night. They didn't jerk the cars around for long, less than a minute, and I soon fell back asleep. When I awoke next morning, I remembered that bump, and just knew it was Barney and I switching to separate tracks. I didn't have much time to dwell on that because one of the officers came through our car and told us it looked and smelled like a pig sty. We spent the next couple of hours policing it up. Later we got up a poker game. I was doing pretty good for a while, but then they cleaned me out.