

ALISHA ERIN HILLAM

Golden Acorn

A LARGE WHITE BOULDER SITS at the junction of routes N826 and N848—roads that lead to Jenneville, Bonnerue, Amberloup, Tillet. Fields amble up and down the green hills; they give way to woods toward the northeast. A handful of houses are jointed together out of brown and beige field stones. Their barns are beaten and weathered. There is a plaque mounted on the white boulder. It is dedicated to the American soldiers who fought for these villages during World War II. I am standing in the Belgian countryside on a cool April afternoon. I am looking for my grandfather.

He is not here. I already know he is at home in Frankfort, Indiana, sitting in his fraying blue armchair and watching an old Western on tv. But he was here, more than seventy years ago. I am looking for a shard of himself, for a marriage of what I know and what it was.

The army unit named on the plaque is the 87th Infantry, the Golden Acorn division: an outfit of American troops whose hometowns were scattered across the rural United States. My grandfather was part of the 347th Regiment, Company K. He was a private, a T/4: a cook.

Letter writing seems to be getting more difficult every week, but I'll manage to write as often as I can find time. ... You said something about it being pretty cold there, well we have an inch of snow here. I'm inside of a small tent writing this by the light of a fire so this is the reason why I don't write very often.

This is what he wrote to my grandmother from Moircy. The night before, he spent a freezing New Year's Eve in Tillet. The next day, the first day of 1945, he moved with his company through the Haies de Tillet, the woods west of town. Patton's Thunderbolts, the 55th Armored Infantry Battalion of the 11th Armored Division, came through Tillet later that day and were pounded by German shelling. They were all fighting in the snowy depths of the Battle of the Bulge to free the 101st Airborne Division, to push back the German advance into Belgium, to end the five-year war.

Well on Dec. 19 you said that you were pretty cold, guess it was pretty cold then & wasn't any too hot here then. Right now we have around 5 or 6 in. of snow on the ground. Sorta rained & snows this evening.

...

Say Honey it seems as though I've sorta slacked up on the writing. Well Darling it isn't all my fault. ... We have been moving a good deal & then it has been too cold to write in a tent, he wrote. Say just keep

right on praying for me Honey because I sure what to make it back. & I know that there is a lot won't. I don't want to be any of them.

My grandfather is a community man, a family man. He was a butcher by trade and operated his own store more than forty years. He grew up on a farm, one of six kids and his mother a widow: he knows plenty about working hard and plenty about the worth of good food.

He married my grandmother as soon as he got home from Europe; they honeymooned while he was still on leave and then he reported back to his division at Fort Benning. He, my grandmother, his mother, the division's men: they all watched Japan with apprehension.

One alert came out to-day, he wrote to his bride. Eleven men on it leave pretty shortly. Then there are two more & if I miss them Darling I'll know what we can do then. I think I'll miss them but if I don't I expect to come home anyway or go to the hospital some way or another, because I'm not going to the Pacific.

And he didn't go to the Pacific. The US dropped the atom bomb, he spent four months at Fort Devens in Massachusetts—where my grandmother joined him—and then got his discharge and went back to Frankfort. He ran a hamburger stand until a friend convinced him to go into the butcher business. In the 1960s he bought and moved out to the farm my grandmother grew up on. He and Grandma were living there in 1991 when I moved in with them, and in the years that followed, I came to know my grandfather with detail and texture. For nearly twenty years I watched him ease into his armchair after a day of work, pulling out his worn-smooth playing cards and flipping them over in Solitaire while he watched *The Nightly Business Report* or *Bonanza*. He traded stocks and went to town. He managed the household; he bought all the groceries. He showed his love with food. Every summer he planted and weeded an acre of garden and filled the house with its produce. The pantry was always full; the chest freezers in the utility room and garage were always full. He kept caramel turtles in his closet for surprise occasions; he carried Werther's in his pockets at church. When he was feeling generous, he brought home Swiss Rolls, pecan rolls, or vanilla cream horns. When I visited home as a newlywed, he sent my husband and I back to college with sacks of groceries; he sent us home once with an entire frozen chicken.

His stories and memories populated our conversations; his life's artifacts populated our home—there were pencils from his Main Meat Market in every drawer in the house. Over and over, he drove me down roads he had driven down to get some catfish or to visit family, past places he had been in car accidents or fallen in love. His fingerprints were left on every

place he had resided or worked or laughed. My surroundings were synonymous with him; the county was a map of his life and I knew all of it, knew him by it. At the door of his butcher shop, the baseball fields of the town park, the cornfields he helped plant and harvest as a boy, everywhere—I felt his past flicker at the corners of my eyes, as if I could turn and grasp him there in my arms.

The summer I was married, my grandparents moved from their farm into town. When I cleaned out my old bedroom before the move, I found a stack of yellowed envelopes wrapped in twine, deep in a box on a top closet shelf. My grandmother's name was scrawled on all of them—mostly her maiden name. The sender was Grandpa. All of them were from the war.

While my grandfather was home on his first leave, he took my grandmother out on a few dates. During his second leave home, he convinced her to break off her engagement—I *could tell she didn't really love him*—and made his own proposal. The scandal of it was small-town—intense and pervasive—but neither of them looked back. She was nineteen, sassy and earnest. He was twenty-one, homesick and repelled by the war. Both of them were smitten. Both of them were terrified. After I found the letters he wrote her, forgotten in the closet for thirty years or more, I read them to my grandmother, whose eyesight was nearly gone. While Grandpa watched *Lawrence Welk* in the other room, I spread them out on the dining room table. We read them all.

Well as for the field, he wrote while stationed in Georgia in 1944, It looks like we won't go to the field [to practice maneuvers] anymore. They are taking most of our field equipment away to-morrow. Honey I don't like to say this but it looks like I won't be around here by Christmas. We are going overseas for sure but how soon I don't know. They start packing the supply room Sept 4. I expect it will be around a month.

And he wrote, *Say it is pretty darn nice to hear from a very sweet girl like you just about every day. Don't worry about me changing my mind about getting married.*

And he wrote to her, *I miss you all the time.*

On a letter dated October 9, 1944, purple ink was scrawled on the envelope in my grandmother's handwriting: *Day I got my Ring.* I read it aloud and Grandma touched her left ring finger, where she wore a silver-and-gold engraved band—the original small diamond engagement ring had long-since been replaced. I read the message Grandpa had sent her: *I sure wish I were there to put the ring on your finger but guess you will have to this time. But I'll get there sometime.*

Then I picked up a thin, almost square envelope dated eleven days later: a telegram from the War Department. My grandmother inhaled softly; I looked at her and she was white. Old fear clung to the telegram, mingling with the smell of lignin and ink. My fingers paused over the broken seal at the back.

No, I thought, no, he made it home. He's sitting in the living room right now. I opened the envelope.

It was a change of address notice.

We both exhaled. My grandmother took the telegram and turned it over in her still-trembling hands. Months later he wrote to her from a combat zone, *Just a few lines to let you know that I'm still alive & kicking & also I still love you.*

Reading these letters now, I realized, was nothing at all like living through receiving them.

When his outfit was shipped out to Europe, they saw combat in the Saar Valley, the Ardennes, the Rhineland. His letters grew sporadic and, scrawled in pup tents by candlelight, sometimes difficult to read. He wrote a lot about home—the high school basketball tourney, mushroom season, the birthdays and holidays he was missing. He said little about his own circumstances; the horror of war was always an understatement, a reality he was reluctant to put down in words.

You asked how everything is coming over here. Maybe I shouldn't say it, but I don't think too much of any of this & don't think anyone else does. We can hear a lot of artillery overhead about all the time. Some fellows are have been wounded, but hope I continue to make out O.K.

Boy several of the fellows did get their feet froze but it has warmed up a little. Lots of mud now. I think I froze my big toe but it is O.K. now. I hope.

There sure is a lot of people who could use things here. Right now we are living in a house with some Belgians. They are very nice. People here sure do want soap. I give them a lot of food.

It is always food with him.

In May of '45 he finally wrote to my grandmother, *Don't look like the war will last more than a couple days longer. Sure will be glad when it is all over everywhere. I hope I don't have to go to the South Paf. I don't want nothing to do with that place. Just want to get home & relax for a while. & to be [with] you honey. Won't that be a happy day.*

VE-Day happened the day after. He came home on the *America* in July, arrived in Frankfort on the 20th, and married her on the 22nd: my grandmother's birthday.

After my grandmother died, I spent many nights at my grandfather's house, to stave off some of his loneliness, to stave off some of mine. He hated to go to bed alone, so we would talk till well past midnight. I asked him every question about himself I could think of; he told me story after story of his life, his childhood, his grandparents, his aunts and uncles. And sometimes, when it was very late, he told me about the war.

In spite of how well I knew him, when it came to the war, I didn't know much. A map of his division's campaign hung in his office downtown. Grandpa kept a small book of photos from his training days in his desk. He cried through the beginning of *White Christmas* every year.

I didn't care for the service, is what he told me. *Got out as quick as I could*. He talked about the time he spent in training camps in Fort Benning, Georgia and Fort Jackson, South Carolina. He talked about the shows he went to see for a dime, the oysters he ate at Ship Ahoy in Columbia, how he played poker and hid in the PX while off assignment to avoid extra duty. He told me about being overseas—how sleeping in pup tents out in deep snow cured him of camping completely. How he was a sharpshooter back home but didn't pay any attention to his army-issue rifle until he drew guard duty in the field. How his unit was part of the occupation for a while and he met a lot of German POWs, how he talked to some Jewish camp survivors.

He told me about becoming a cook: how they assigned him because the two cooks at their first camp in Mississippi were do-nothing drunks, because he had worked at a three-stool burger joint during high school. How it was a good enough job in the army and a good deal better than some. He told me about cooking in the field: how they set up the kitchen in the mess tent four or five miles back from the fighting and did all their cooking for two hundred-some men on three gas stoves. How the mess soldiers cut up sheep from the commissary or hunted deer or handed out K and C rations; how it kept him stationed at company headquarters instead of at the very front line. How he served breakfast to men—to so many men—who did not come back for dinner. His division suffered 11,587 casualties while in Europe: 82.2% of their men. *Cooking*, he said, *saved my life*.

The more he told me, the more aware I was that the years he spent in the army were unreal to me, uncharted in their lay across Wallonia. Impossible even to picture him in Europe. One

day it occurred to me that these were places I could go to: documented towns where he slept and ate and cooked, where he had *been*. I wanted to see them, because he saw them. To grasp a fragment of his experience, to see him more clearly by seeing him against the ridges of the Ardennes. I wanted to know him there the way that I knew him at home: by the long lines of county roads stretching past farmhouses, by the sun glinting on the fields of corn, by the squat shape of Aldi's, leaving with a box of food under his arm.

With the Army, my grandfather saw England, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, and Czechoslovakia, all bloody, bombed out messes. He visited Paris on leave and found nothing to eat and nothing to do. After he got home, he never left North America again. In letter after letter he wrote in Europe, he said, *Everything sure is different. I'll sure stick to the good old Indiana any day, and I sure wish I were back in Frankfort.*

We got everything everyone else has got, right here in Indiana, he still insisted to me years later.

And although he never used the word himself, the war turned him into a pacifist. *War is hell,* he said to me over and over. *War is hell.* It reverberated through the family. When Mark, his oldest son, signed up to go to Vietnam, it broke Grandpa's heart.

Grandpa didn't go much for Veteran's Day either, was silent on the topic. As a child, patriotic and eager, I wondered how to thank him for something he didn't like talking about, how to express gratitude he didn't seem to want, and I wondered why he didn't want it. After reading his letters, after our late night talks, I stopped wondering. What man wanted thanks for a job he'd hated, for service he'd been forced to give? I thought of how unwilling he was, how young, how alone. He wrote from Europe to my grandmother, *Say to-morrow will make that I've been in the Army two years. Two wasted ones.*

He wrote, *I would give anything I ever had to get out of here.*

In Belgium, I spend the better part of an afternoon driving the roads between Jenneville, Bonnerue, and Amberloup: ten or so kilometers that endured two of the worst weeks of the winter of 1944-45, two of the most violent and terrifying weeks of my grandfather's life. On this day, this April afternoon, everything is sunny and growing. It is idyllic, pastoral. The buildings are quaint and the landscape is quiet and empty.

I have come here to find land that etched my grandfather into who he is, to feel a vestige of him flickering in these former battlefields, to fill a gap. I have come here armed with

battle timelines and copies of the letters my grandfather wrote from the field—from these fields. I follow him and the 347th Regiment through the blood-soaked first days of January 1945: a tangle of towns captured and recaptured, of marches and movement at night under thick clouds. I am trying to find my grandfather in all of this: filthy, camped in deep snow or in Belgian homes, surrounded by German artillery, providing food for hundreds and hundreds of desperate, freezing soldiers.

I am alive today because he married my grandmother when he got back from Europe. Because he survived the shells detonating around him, because he managed to come home when so many of the men around him did not. I am alive today because he cooked in the army. Because he flipped burgers in high school.

As I drive through these tiny Belgian villages, as I stop to read plaques on church walls dedicated to the 87th Infantry, I think about the cold, and the snipers in the steeples of the buildings I am standing next to. I think about the bodies my grandfather saw half-buried in bloody snow, the men he watched die, the nauseating fear that must have filled him. All around me there are buildings that predate the war: any of these could have been where he sought refuge, where he set up the kitchen, where he wrote these yellowed letters to my grandmother. I am as close as I can be to who he was at twenty-two.

I am standing in the places he stood, holding the words that he wrote, and I feel so far away from him.

His slim frame, his muscular hands stirring vats of stew or peeling potatoes are not waiting just out of sight. It's no use. The war was too ghastly and too foreign. He was too opposed to his conscription, was too desperate to get out of Europe. There are no lingering fingerprints; there is no cartography to know him by. I cannot reconcile his words, his experience, with the rolling sunny hills, the enormous stillness in front of me.

It is disappointing and disorienting.

It is the dimmest echo, I realize, of his own bewilderment here.

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