

# Going Home

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The war was hunting him. He knew this deep in the folds of his brain and far down inside the hidden pathways of his nerves, but he tried to shake these instincts free and look at the instrument panel in front of him. He focused on flying and refused to think of the flak that was detonating around his aircraft in frightening bursts of black. He held the U-shaped yoke with both hands in order to keep everything steady, everything stable, but the whole plane bucked and jolted. The sky cracked open in puffy explosions. Jagged shards of steel zipped through the air. Planes around him fell.

Lieutenant Odd Englebretson looked at his instrument panel (altitude, air speed, fuel) and the numbers that kept him aloft all seemed good. He and his co-pilot banked hard and circled around the way they had just come. Odd allowed himself a moment to glance down at the firestorm raging below in Nazi Germany. Docks, ships, warehouses, submarine pens, syn-thetic oil factories and roads were all ablaze in brilliant shades of orange. Bomb bursts marched across factories and enormous shockwaves rippled across the city. The whole harbor boiled in a sea of punishing fire as a column of black smoke vented upwards. It was the color of used motor oil. It foamed and lifted. The 321st Bomb Group had just dropped over thirty tons of TNT onto Hamburg and, now, they were on their way back to the green fields of England.

The return journey wouldn't be easy. Odd and his crew had a blown out engine – the propeller spun lazily as greasy smoke vented from it, and there was tremendous drag on the right wing as he fought to keep everything level, everything purring. He was surrounded by other olive drab airplanes that were also in various states of damage. Odd realized his tongue was dry and he licked his cracked lips.

He turned to his co-pilot. "How's engine three?" he asked, adjusting his rubber air mask. "Think we can we make it home?"

Odd pointed the snout of his bomber towards an imaginary dot on the horizon and, like the other B-17 Flying Fortresses thrumming around him, he pushed towards it, dreaming of a cigarette and a tall glass of whiskey. England and all of its safety was just beyond the curvature of the earth. All he had to do was arc

towards it, all he had to do was keep the gyroscope steady and let the simple physics of air speed and thrust work their magic. For now, the long slow fall to earth was being denied.

"How's engine three?" he asked again.

His co-pilot, Finn O'Brien, leaned towards the window. "Torn to shit. We got holes out there the size of fucking *baseballs*." His Boston accent was strong and he stretched out the word *baseballs*.

"Think we'll make it?"

"Hard to say, skipper."

Engine number three was only one problem to worry about. There was also a large, tangled mess hanging and flapping in front of Odd. Although he couldn't be sure, it seemed like most of the nosecone had been torn off. A few minutes ago, they'd taken a direct hit with flak and the entire Plexiglas nose had been ripped away. The support beams at the front of the plane sprouted open like some kind of strange metal flower. It looked bad, and Odd wondered if they would have to parachute out. The idea of drifting down to Nazi Germany and then being tossed into a prisoner of war camp made him shake his head.

"Naw. We'll make it," he said to O'Brien. "We ain't bailing out. Not today." His tone was full of conviction but, deep down, he wasn't so sure. The flak was letting up so, maybe, with a little luck, they might all be gloriously drunk in five hours. Yeah, he thought, thinking of that glass of whiskey again. If the secret gears and switches of his plane kept on doing their thing, maybe he'd be able to light a cigarette and drift into the numb. Easy-peasy, he thought. Just stay focused.

Inside his facemask, he pursed his lips and pretended to blow out cigar smoke. His mouth was still dry and he sucked on his tongue to make some spit. Flak continued to burst around the cockpit in dark blots. He looked out, and swallowed.

Odd hated flak more than just about anything else in the war. Back on base, while he whittled away time, he often heard phantom explosions in his eardrums. Flak was one of the more diabolical inventions of modern warfare, he thought. The Germans sent artillery shells whistling up into the sky and these canisters exploded around incoming bombers like him. Although it looked like black smoke, lurking inside each of these clouds were fist-sized chunks of metal. If you flew into flak (and it was damn near impossible not to) your plane would be shredded.

Peppered. You'd get holes in the wings, holes in the fuselage, and holes in the tail. The vital linkages of the landing gear might get ruined. Bellies and ribcages might get ripped open. Yes, he nodded, flak was new and terrible. It was a shortening of the German phrase "*Fliegerabwehrkanone*" and, for the Americans running daylight raids against the Nazi empire, it was the biggest challenge they had to face. In its inert state, a flak shell stood as high as a baseball bat, it was as wide as a cannonball. After it sizzled up into the air, though, after it had climbed to its terminal point of apogee, a fuse snapped open and blackness was spewed out over a radius of forty feet. Shards of steel took flight, hunting for flesh and oil. And whenever Odd closed his eyes, he saw flak—the random bursting of it, the rending of sky, he saw fragments flashing through his skull at 2,200 feet per second. When black flak cracked, the air itself was freighted with oblivion.

He sucked his tongue, and tried to swallow. His mouth was so *dry*. A drop of whiskey would do wonders.

On their bomb run over Hamburg, they'd received so much flak it looked like inky dots had been flung against the blue sky. But as they got closer, it looked more like octopus ink or wisps of murk. When they were almost on top of their target, the explosions could be heard above the roaring engines. *Ba-boom! Ba-boom!* Shrapnel clanked against the wings. It was like being caught in a hailstorm. *Ba-boom! Ba-boom!* And then a shattering of steel hail.

But now, at last, they were leaving the flak behind. Odd looked at the altimeter and considered the hard calculus of what lay ahead. The nosecone had been blasted away, an engine was gone, and they were about to chart a course over the unforgiving North Sea. In a few minutes, parachuting out wouldn't be an option. No, they wouldn't last ten minutes in the freezing water below. Their flight suits would weigh them down, they'd get hypothermia, and they'd sink into the dark. Men of the air, drowned at sea.

Odd moved the yoke to make sure he still controlled the plane. It seemed flyable and this pleased him to the marrow of his bones.

"We're still in business," he said, slapping his copilot's arm.

It was only then that he turned his attention to his bombardier. Flak had shattered open the Plexiglas nose, and Mike Adams had been hit. Badly hit.

"How's Mike?" Odd asked over the interphone.

The thunderous rumble of the Wright Cyclone engines was the only answer. The whole plane shook and vibrated.

"Pilot to navigator. I say again, how's Adams?"

Jablonski, a lanky guy from Chicago, tapped Odd on the shoulder. His hands were covered in blood and there was a spray of red across his leather flight jacket. A smear of what looked like strawberry jam was on his shoulder. From the look on Jablonski's face, Odd knew his bombardier was dead. It was just a matter of—

"How?"

Jablonski said nothing at first. And then, slowly, he pointed to his head.

It made Odd worry about the other men under his command, so he cleared his throat and adjusted his mask. He clicked on the interphone. "Listen up, fellas. How's everyone doing? Check in."

In his headset, Odd heard the familiar voices of his crew.

"Tail gunner, okay."

"Right waist gunner, okay."

"Left waist gunner, okay."

"Upper turret, okay."

"Ball turret, okay."

"Radio okay."

"Co-pilot, a-okay."

Odd glanced back at Jablonski. A bit of bone was caught in the fur of the man's leather jacket—it looked like an eggshell—and there was something else—a clump of pinky cauliflower.

Turbulence made the plane lurch up and Jablonski braced himself against a support beam. The jostling knocked him back to reality and he returned to his station without being ordered to do so. He was the navigator, and without him being at his little desk there was little chance of returning to England safely.

"Jablonski," Odd said into the interphone. "You there? What's your map say?"

A moment passed.

"Jablonski. Look at your map. Read it."

"There's . . . there's a lot of blood on it, skipper"

"I don't care. Read the map. Get us home."

There was a clearing of a throat. "Home. Yes, sir. You need to chart a course northwest by three degrees."

"Roger that. Three degrees." Odd looked at the compass and focused on an invisible dot, far away.

"Keep it up, Jablonski. You're doing fine."

That's what he said for the benefit of his men on the plane but something else was rattling around in the privacy of his head, something that he didn't want to say aloud. *Adams is dead. Adams is dead.* Odd heard this phrase echoing in the tissue of his own pink brain and he couldn't make it go away. If only he'd flown ten feet higher, or lower, or to the left, the flak might have missed the nose and maybe, just maybe, Mike Adams would still be alive. It was all a matter of space and timing. If only he'd pulled back on the yoke half-an-inch, his friend might still be alive and —

Odd shook his head. No, the war was hunting them all. It was bad luck. That's all that it was. Bad, evil, rotten luck.

At least they were hit after the bombs had been released, he told himself. It would have been an unholy nightmare to fly his Fortress if two tons of explosives were still pinned inside the belly of the plane. Imagine that. They had been hit, that was true, but what if flak had reeled up into the sky thirty seconds earlier and ignited the bombs? If that had happened, his whole plane would have become a bright point in the sky. It would have become a falling meteor.

Bits of mangled nosecone broke free and pinged off the windshield. He and O'Brien instinctively ducked and closed their eyes. An electrical cord flapped away from the snout of the plane and flew back into a propeller. Fluffy insulation burst up and hung on the windscreen for a moment before it skittered away. They were falling behind the other B-17s and Odd wondered if the Germans would send up fighter planes to pick them off. There was nothing he could do about that if it happened. He glanced at the wing and watched the propellers on the engines continue to blur. All he could do was aviate, navigate, and communicate. He let training and experience swallow him up.

His crew once said that he had icicles for nerves, and Odd wanted to live up to this image so he got on the interphone again.

"I know we're dinged up pretty bad, but everything's under control. We're going to make it home, fellas. Keep your eyes peeled for Kraut warbirds." He paused and felt like he should add something inspirational, but nothing came to mind. He sucked on his front teeth to make spit. "I'll keep you posted."

Odd shivered. Although he was from Minnesota and although knew one or two things about subzero

weather, he wasn't prepared for minus sixty degrees. That's what the temperature was at 32,000 thousand feet. He wore long johns, two sets of wool socks, two shirts, a sheepskin leather jacket, and heavy gloves that were electrically heated. Even with all of this, his fingertips were still frozen. At such a great height above the earth, the machine guns stammered out bullets slowly because the oil inside their geared parts was as thick as honey. Frost formed at the edges of the windscreen. He could almost see the curvature of the Earth.

With such a huge opening in the nose of his plane, the cold was worse now. Wind whistled around them. All they could do was thump through the air as the other B-17s pulled far ahead. White contrails etched the sky behind their engines and they looked like a band of dragonflies on the distant horizon.

Time seemed to flow in reverse.

An hour slipped by.

Then another.

No one spoke.

The engines were as constant as the pale blue around them. He looked down at the wrinkled ocean and saw a battleship slicing a furrow in the grey waters. British or German? He shrugged because it was impossible to tell. The sun sparkled and the whole world looked so beautiful, so peaceful, so not at war. He tried to move his fingertips but couldn't feel them.

"Navigator to pilot," Jablonski said on the interphone. His voice was edged with excitement. "We're getting close. You'll see England soon."

"Roger that."

The fuel gauge was nearing E and Odd pointed at it. O'Brien winced and, together, they kept the bomber steady. Maybe they'd have to ditch in the ocean after all? If they ran out of fuel they'd have to land on the water and hope they could scramble out before the plane sank. It would be a messy and cold business. Where was the flare gun?

"Pilot to crew," Odd said while keeping his eyes on the instrument panel. "We need to lighten the load to make the most of our remaining gas. Dump anything overboard that's weighing us down. That means guns, ammo, fire extinguishers — anything not nailed down. Once you dump it, I want all hatches sealed to reduce drag." A pause and then he added, "I don't want to go swimming, gentlemen. And I bet you don't either."

A chorus of voices poured into his ears as he

continued to stare at the fuel gauge. The arrow was just a hair above empty.

*Come on*, Odd thought. He leaned forward in his canvas chair—his ass was numb and full of needling pain—he willed the plane towards the coast of England. *Come on, baby*, he thought. *Come on*.

And then, materializing up from the horizon as if it were a mythical island, there it was.

England.

As the low coastline of Norwich got larger and larger, he pushed the yoke forward to begin their descent. The interphone filled with laughter as they roared over the rocky coast. The green and brown quilt of the countryside never looked so magnificent, so welcoming, so sturdy and bountiful. Sheep dotted the fields. Cars were on the other side of the road. Slate roofs clustered around medieval churches and he saw Spitfires from the Royal Air Force flying towards—he squinted—yes, they were flying towards Cambridge.

As long as they didn't crash, they might be in a pub in thirty minutes. Whiskey. Fuel. Odd glanced at the gauges when engine one began to splutter. It sounded like a washing machine slowing down. The nose began to drag and he had trouble keeping the gyroscope steady. Up. Up. Up. He needed lift.

"Get ready for a drop in oil pressure," he shouted to O'Brien.

Engine one stopped and a red light winked on. The propeller spun in the airflow, feathering. Odd studied the dials in front of him. Maybe they wouldn't make it after all? He glanced at a photo of his girlfriend—it was stuck to the corner of the windshield with rubber cement. She smiled back at him and, in that moment, as his plane dropped from the sky, he wanted so very badly to be home in Minnesota. He wanted to walk along the river and talk about the future. He wanted to smell perfume on her neck and hear cicadas in the pine trees. He wanted, yes, her.

There would be no second chance at a landing. He knew this. He accepted this. If he got it wrong he'd become just another name in the obituary section of *The Stillwater Gazette*. Odd glanced at his girlfriend and searched the horizon for the air base. They were close now. Maybe twenty miles out. The shadow of his plane scudded across the landscape below.

"Landing gear down," he said to O'Brien, trying to sound calm.

"Roger that. Landing gear down."

A thump and a hydraulic groan came from be-

neath the fuselage as two wheels slowly locked into place. Odd stared at the instrument panel as they flew through a cumulus cloud. It seemed like the gear was down okay. Had flak destroyed the tires? Would they skid sideways as they landed and maybe flip into a crash?

Any minute now they'd see the base. Any. Minute. Now.

Engine four began to splutter. The whole plane seemed heavier and drowsier than it did even ten seconds ago.

"There it is!" Odd yelled. He wished he sounded more cool and relaxed, but he fizzed with joy. His voice was like uncorked champagne. But even as he wiggled his shoulders in celebration, a dark thought crawled into his mind. Two weeks ago the crew of *Foxy Phoebe* were this close when—

Odd measured his words. "Brace for impact, fellas. This might be rough."

They bobbed towards a distant ribbon of runway and Odd tried not to think about the waiting ambulances or the fire engines. He looked at a massive orange windsock. It was beautiful, it was getting closer, and the wind was blowing a north-by-northeast.

Most of the other B-17s were already home and he knew all eyes were on him. Visions of what happened to *Foxy Phoebe* burned in his imagination. He wiggled his fingers on the yoke as O'Brien called out height.

"Four hundred feet...three hundred...two hundred...looking good, skipper, one hundred..."

They were falling fast. Like a stone. It was going to be a hard landing and Odd pulled back on the stick to get as much air speed as possible. The runway wasn't below them just yet and, if he landed on the grassy field, the whole plane might flip over. The tires would sink into the damp soil and the tail would summersault end over end. He pulled back on the yoke.

"...fifty..."

His vision narrowed. He saw only a widening strip of concrete. A bug hit the windscreen in a spray of yellow green.

"...twenty..."

When the tires yelped against the concrete, the impact pressed him down into his seat. The U-shaped yoke between his hands trembled as they blurred down the runway and then, slowly, with a juddering of brakes and a shriek of metal against metal, they taxied onto a slipway. When the wheels finally came to a stop, Odd and O'Brien looked at each other for a moment.

They shut off the pulsating vibrating shaking engines and then, when silence had settled over the plane like a warm blanket, they sat back. Their world was quiet.

That's when the crew erupted into cheers.

"That's our twelfth mission over with," O'Brien said, unhooking his seatbelt and climbing out of the co-pilot seat. He patted Odd on the shoulder. "Only eighteen more and my ass gets to go *home*."

"Home." Odd said the word as if it were a foreign country.

"I can almost taste the beer in Southie," O'Brien added, moving to the escape hatch. "Nice flying, skipper. You were wicked good up there."

Odd's wool underwear was sweaty and when he straightened his back it was strange to hear the creaking of his leather jacket. He unclenched his fists from the yoke. For over eight hours he had been holding onto the U-shaped stick and it felt good to wiggle his fingers. After he peeled off his gloves, he sat back and enjoyed the quiet of the cockpit. He even enjoyed the stabbing ache in the base of his spine because it meant that he was alive. Pain was good, he thought. Pain meant survival. Pain meant life. Slowly, he took his feet off the rudder pedals and gave them a shake.

He patted the engine throttles and listened to the rest of the crew jumping out of the plane. Odd Englebretson had one secret rule that no one else knew about: no matter what happened, he would always be the last one out of the plane. It didn't matter if this happened on the ground or if it happened at 32,000 feet. He would always be the last one out. It was a promise he'd made to himself. It was an oath.

Odd unhooked his oxygen supply and gathered up his logbook. Before standing up, he smiled at the picture of his girlfriend, Penny. She looked back at him with coifed hair and it seemed like she was on the verge of laughing. Odd had taken the photo at sunset and his long shadow stretched over the grass. The shade of himself lay prostrate before her, his head at her feet.

And now, halfway around the globe, the people of Stillwater, Minnesota, were waking up to scrambled eggs and bacon. They were switching on radios and listening to WCCO. Trucks would soon be delivering blocks of ice and newspaper boys would soon be tossing headlines onto front porches. The war rested at each screen door. Soon, it would be brought inside.

Odd shook his head. Debriefing still needed to

happen and he needed to inspect the damage done to his plane.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a bullet. It was a .22 with his name carved into it. He gave it a kiss. This was part of superstition and his own private ritual. The first thing he did when he climbed into his Fortress was kiss this bullet, and it was the last thing he did before exiting the cockpit. With so much death orbiting around him, and with so many incomprehensible images of bombers breaking apart and being sucked into the ground, the spirit world seemed closer than ever. Thousands of new ghosts were created every time his bomber lifted into the air. Buildings melted. Factories boiled in fire. Bodies disappeared. Although he and his crew never talked about dying — that would be tempting fate — most of them had good luck charms to ward off evil. Nearly all of the airmen who flew into Nazi Germany had something to keep them safe: Saint Christopher medals, rabbit's feet, four-leaf clovers, locks of hair, coins, rosaries, pebbles, love letters. Such things offered the illusion that the war was controllable, that death might not see you. Odd was no different. He put the bullet back into his breast pocket and hurried out of the plane. Mission twelve was in the history books. He dared not whisper the number of their next mission.

The ground crew already had a cowling off one of the engines and they were busy loosening bolts. What really caught Odd's attention was the front of the plane. A large part of it was missing, like a giant hand had ripped it away. Wires and cables dangled. One of the machine guns was bent at an impossible forty-five degree angle.

"Where's Adams?" Odd asked, looking around.

Someone pointed to a Red Cross truck where medics were busy tucking a green blanket around a body. They cinched it down with a rope.

O'Brien leaned into Odd's ear. He whispered. "Most of his head got blown off. Poor bastard didn't feel a thing."

A chubby kid with red hair and crooked teeth stood on a ladder near the bombardier's station. A hose was handed up to him and he began to slop out the mess. Rumor had it he'd grown up in a slaughterhouse and was used to seeing such things. All that mess. All that blood. As the kid worked, a red puddle formed beneath the plane. Broken glass and rivets floated in a rainbow slick of oil.

Odd had known Mike Adams since their training days in South Dakota. They did bomb runs over the Badlands and dropped sandbags onto enormous chalk targets. Friendly and outgoing, Adams enjoyed the peacefulness of fly fishing – the lazy whip of the line – and like everyone else he too had a good luck charm. His wife had given him a silver necklace and he'd kept coiled in his breast pocket. It was probably still there, Odd thought, useless now.

He felt the beginning of a sob and pretended to cough. No, Odd thought bitterly. Such feelings were for later, when he was behind the privacy of a locked door.

A member of his crew, Ira Metzger, a little guy from Brooklyn with large hands, hugged one of the chipped propeller blades. The huge engine clicked and ticked above him as it cooled. Dripping oil sizzled onto the tarmac. Metzger gave the blade a loving pat. This too was part of tradition. Metzger may have been short but he didn't let anyone boss him around. He was Jewish and made a point to have *H*, for Hebrew, stamped onto his dogtags. In boot camp it was strongly suggested that he leave his religious affiliation blank in case he had to parachute into Germany, but he wasn't about to change who he was. "I'm a Jew," he said with a hard face. "You got a problem with that, bub?"

Odd watched Metzger give the propeller another pat and then he glanced at the body of his friend being loaded into the Red Cross truck. Four other shapes were already stacked inside like strange unrisen loaves of bread. The medics climbed into the front, they slammed their doors, and they drove off to the morgue. Like everyone else, Odd avoided thinking about that place. It gave him the creeps to think of his body resting there. Someone claimed it was full of ice blocks to keep everything cool. The windows were tinted black to keep people from looking in. The morgue was at the far end of the base, and no one ever talked about it. The morgue was a non-place. It was invisible. Unseen.

Odd looked at his flight boots. He wiggled his toes inside the fur lining and decided to do a slow turn around the plane. Had he really landed it safely? Were they really still alive? He could almost feel the crush of his un-lived future selves clamoring to get inside the warm shell of his body – they demanded that he survive the war and allow them to exist.

He shook such thoughts from his head and went around the plane with a clipboard. He counted twenty-seven holes, as well as two massive scorch marks on the fuselage. A chunk of flak was embedded in an

engine and there was a gash in the left wing the size of a hat rack – Odd put his hand through this opening and felt an aileron cable. It was badly frayed and, when he plucked it, the cable snapped in half and clattered inside the guts of the wing.

"Sweet Jesus," he said, shaking his head. "That was close."

The rest of his crew huddled near the ball turret and talked about the mission as if it had happened to someone else. They pointed at holes and crouched near the tires. They whistled and shook their heads in disbelief. It was sobering to realize that their souls hadn't been released somewhere high above the Third Reich, it was good to slap each other on the back, and it was good to laugh, to feel your diaphragm shudder with the joy of being deliciously and totally alive.

"One for the books," they said, offering high-fives.

"Hell of a thing."

"Daaaamn."

"A doozy!"

Jablonski, who had seen it all and had to sit with a decapitated body in the nose of the plane, sat on the grass. He smoked a cigarette and stared at a distant field. Blood was smeared across his flight jacket. The little eggshell of skull was still in the fur of his collar.

Fifty yards away, on another hardstand, Odd watched the crew of *Homing Pigeon* gather around the tail-wheel of their Fortress and collectively pee on it as thanksgiving for coming home safe. It was their ritual, this peeing. After they shook themselves dry and zipped up, they started to roughhouse. They acted like school boys. Odd counted them: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine . . . all ten were home.

"Safely," he whispered to himself.

He took off his hat and ran a hand through his greasy hair. "Listen up," he yelled. He whistled to get his crew's attention. "Fellas! Shut up...listen. Over here. Let's move along for debriefing. O'Brien and I'll be there in a minute."

As his crew shuffled towards a large brick building, Metzger held out a hand and pulled Jablonski to his feet. He patted him on the shoulder as if to say, how you doing? And then, together, this group of slouching aviators walked away, cheating the war another day. Bits of gravel skittered away from their boots. They lit cigarettes. They laughed. Their shadows moved as one.

Odd walked around to the front of the plane and shook his head at the missing nosecone. The gangly kid with a hose was still spraying and squirting water. Mist

hit Odd's cheek.

"It's like a wild animal tore it off," O'Brien said, shielding his eyes from the sun. He stretched out the word animal and it reminded Odd, once again, that his co-pilot was from Boston. "Like a big bad fucking wolf, you know? Tel me Odd...how'd we fly this turd bird home?"

He laughed, even though he didn't feel like laughing. He shrugged a shoulder and added, "Beats me. Luck, I guess."

The two men leaned against a Jeep and looked around. Sickly weeds sprouted up from the asphalt and a cat skulked on the edge of the base. The grand mansion of Milecross House waited behind them. Covered in ivy and crowned with chimneys, it was home to a select group of officers. The dining room was for high level meetings and the huge gaming room in the east wing had been turned into a pub. The house was built in 1740 and it dripped with tapestries, chandeliers, and wall-sized oil paintings. It groaned under the weight of its own history. For the men of the 321st Bomb Group, it was home.

After what had just happened over the skies of Germany, many of the beds inside wouldn't be used tonight. Footlockers would be emptied and the awful work of writing telegrams home to the United States would soon begin. Odd thought about Mike Adams's wife making breakfast somewhere in Georgia. Yes, he thought. Somewhere bright, where the sun was just beginning to peek through the willow trees, maybe at this very moment, she was cracking eggs into a cast iron skillet. As far as she knew, her husband was still alive. He was still among the breathing and she wasn't a widow. As eggs hissed and spit in the pan, maybe her daughter came trudging downstairs, rubbing sleep from the corners of her eyes. The two of them might smile at each other, little knowing that their world had just changed forever. His body would be in the morgue by now. Soon, a typewriter would clack out his death certificate.

Odd shifted his weight against the Jeep.

He imagined his dead bombardier climbing out of their Flying Fortress. In a flashing moment of imagination and longing, he saw Mike Adams squint at the baby blue sky. He held up his arms in a V as the power of a yawn took him over. He was still alive and whole and spirited. Laughter and music waited up ahead. He might sit in the corner of the billiards room at Milecross House later on and write a letter home to

his wife, just like he always did after a mission. His foot might tap to music. And then, after a few pints of warm beer, he might talk about his plans to open a car dealership once the war was over. "Y'all can come work for me," he would say with his thousand-watt smile. "We got high rollers in Georgia. Them cars'll be easy to sell. Like sweet tea on a hot day."

Odd stared at the asphalt and pulled out two cigarettes. He offered one to O'Brien and flipped open his Zippo. A flame sparked to attention and the two men puffed in silence. The kid with a hose continued his necessary work. Water sprayed and hissed.

"Well," O'Brien said after a long pause. "It's good to be home."

Odd looked at rivets, and broken glass, and blood. He stared at the empty spot where Mike Adams had climbed out of his body and drifted off, into the unknown. Odd took in a lungful of smoke and watched water drip from what used to be the nosecone. So it was true after all, he thought. The war really was hunting for souls. And he would never really come back from that brutal, intimate knowledge.

He took in a lung full of smoke and exhaled slowly. "Yes," he said. "I guess it is. Home."