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Georgie Karacek's cell mate watched him flail on the floor like a landed trout. His butt went *thumpety thump* on the varnished pine. It was way past Taps. Their MP was at the duty desk up the hall.

"Serrrrrgeant?"

"Wha?" The Sergeant had a jowl packed with hoagie.

"Karacek's havin a fit."

The cell mate leaned farther over his top bunk. Georgie's spine now arched into a rigid bow, and he started sort of crab-dancing heel/head, heel/head, drumming on the wood. If he was faking, it was pretty strenuous stuff.

Georgie's eyes rolled back, showing only whites. He was the color of a turnip.

"Damn, Sergeant!"

A *sqwonk!* of chair-scoot, then the noncom stood outside worrying the lock. He swung the door and, holding his riot stick, leaned over while standing back from the convulsing Private, as if Georgie were a puddle of something he meant to keep his boots out of.

"Hey, Karacek!" He poked Georgie with the baton as Georgie's bowed form locked tight, then, howling his terrible, incomprehensible aria, Georgie trembled and quaked, at last sank flat to the floor. He sighed. His clenched fists bloomed slowly open to show pink palms. A spot the size of a saucer darkened his lap. The cell mate once had KP with Georgie. You could flim-flam the amiable fellow into doing your

work, but you had to bear the malarkey about that wife, and he didn't care who heard him quoting poetry. And one time he froze on the cargo nets and they had to pluck him off like a June bug from a window screen.

The Sergeant prodded Georgie's shoulder with his boot. "Private Karacek!" he boomed.

In a moment, Georgie's eyelids parted.

"Tonus and Clonus," he groaned.

At the West Garrison hospital, you'd have thought it noon not midnight the way lights blazed, and nurses, orderlies, patients and doctors came and went while the lame or lazy snoozed with arms flung across their eyes. But it was always that way everywhere now. *The enemy never sleeps!* the posters warned, so nobody else could, either. Catch a few winks and next you know the Luftwaffe's ripping up your roof. Being hardly forty miles from the Pacific meant getting rousted out in the dark and hustled down to the shore in the rain to repel a Jap invasion. Between the units dragging in from punishing night hikes to reveille calls at 3:45 for breakfast K.P., the camp knew no difference between night and day.

Dimly he was aware they asked if he'd had measles; having apparently said yes, he was bunked between two live cases. He lay groggy from the seizure while a medic with a clipboard interrogated him. Outside in the street deuce-and-a-halves coughed and cleared their diesel throats amidst a chorus of shouted orders as a battalion clambered up through olive-drab proscenia burdened with everything they'd been issued, off to Ord or Oakland or San Francisco to board Liberty ships bound for the Pacific.

For a brief spell he slept, though once a nurse shook him awake and poked a thermometer in his mouth, then, reading it, sneered, "You don't look sick to me," and strode off.

An M.P. showed up as Georgie was staggering into the legs of his fatigue pants. The M.P. had a toothpick secured between his teeth. Silently he watched

Georgie button his trousers. Being under his scrutiny felt like being observed picking your nose. As usual, it hurt like the dickens to move. Tender bruises glowed like big juke box buttons all over his body and his calves had golf ball knots where he'd cramped. A swelling on the back of his head oozed clear fluid into his palm when he cupped it. His pants had dried but stank of piss. Thank God he hadn't crapped them.

Dawn glimmered pale out the window. The ambulatory patients had lined up for mess. He could smell bacon from somewhere in the building, and his stomach lurched.

"Let's move it, goldbrick."

"I haven't had breakfast, Sir."

"Don't sir me, Private! I'm not a fucking *officer!*"

"Sorry."

They left the building with the Corporal behind him, his baton cocked at Parade Rest. When they reached the sidewalk, the M.P.'s coffee-graveled baritone came at his nape *hup tooup threeup fo* and Georgie skipped once to take the beat. Across the Salinas River the sun burst over the Cholame Hills and the sudden orange flare disclosed lively tableaux - half-tracks clattering on pavement in the company street, a trio of WACS in nurse's togs floating by in a swoony fog of banned cologne and steadfastly averting their heads, a convoy of troop trucks roaring out of the motor pool, a platoon, slung rifles shouldered, tramping across their path at a crossroad while the M.P. kept him marking time. Guys in the ranks shot him sidelong glances of curiosity or contempt.

When they marched past the stockade, Georgie pitched over his shoulder, "Uh, where we going, Corporal?"

"Shut up, goldbrick."

"Firing squad?"

The Corporal popped him sharply right atop that lump. He winced, sucked air through his teeth. They marched on in silence. Several times the M.P. ordered him off the foot path to mark time when anyone in uniform approached, so their progress

was halting. They appeared to be heading toward HQ at the far end of the loop. Georgie's unit was billeted in tents across the river, and, as much as he hated the desert heat and the dust, he longed for his simple narrow cot.

"Corporal, can I ask you something."

The M.P. grunted.

"Am I going to a court-martial? Reason I ask is I haven't shaved or brushed my teeth or combed my hair, and I'd like to put on fresh fatigues. If we --"

Another *whack!* to the noggin.

"Ouch! Damn, Corporal, it was a civil question!"

The M.P. marched him up the steps of HQ, which looked like the camp's many other rudimentary framed structures, though the approach up the graveled walk sported a border of indigenous succulents whose names he didn't know. Inside, at the end of a very busy hall, he was halted outside a closed door where another M.P. stood guard. Georgie's escort handed papers to his counterpart.

"All yours."

To his departing back, Georgie called out, "Thanks for your forbearance." The Corporal ignored him, but the new warden clapped him hard on the shoulder to drive him to a pew-like bench and growled for him to hold out his hands. He was cuffed with them in his lap. This new M.P. was a Staff Sergeant with black eyes nested in wrinkles like those of an ancient tortoise. His sleeve had a half dozen hash marks.

He wagged his finger at Georgie.

"No funny business, Private."

The mode of the warning seemed oddly avuncular, but then this old dog probably joined up when Georgie was still in diapers. Georgie nodded, eager to please. The M.P. went through the office door and closed it. During the hour he sat he kept tucking his feet under as people strode by continuously -- hatless murmuring officers and non-com company runners or high-division couriers in cyclist's boots, sashaying attaches, WAC clerks in flirty skirts, most bearing file folders and striding

the hall with earnest intent as if lives at either distant front depended upon their efficient dispatch. It made you want to stand and salute.

At length the old Sergeant returned, unlatched the cuffs, took him gently at the elbow and guided him through the door. Soon as they'd cleared the threshold, the M.P. bellowed, "Teennn-HUT!" and snapped to as an officer entered.

"At ease, Sergeant. Your prisoner's mine now. You're dismissed."

For a bit Georgie stood at attention staring at a framed photograph of Roosevelt on the wall. About that photo and another of General Patton were arrayed plaques with painted unit crests for the 77th Infantry Training Battalion (Georgie's present unit), the 26th Artillery Brigade, and the 7th Armored: the famous black-bordered triangle showing a half-track slashed by a lightning bolt. The officer's wooden desk was an Independence Day parade entry, its corners festooned with miniature American and regimental flags, and two clean ashtrays fashioned from the butt ends of artillery canisters.

Without moving, he tried to watch as the seated officer - birds on his collar points -- leafed through papers. Maybe his.

His stomach growled loud as a freighter's creaking hawser. He considered apologizing. He held himself erect so stiffly that his calves were about to cramp again, and he hadn't drawn a good long breath since the officer had entered.

The Colonel looked up, frowning. "You're Private George Karacek?"

"Yes, sir."

"Stand at ease, Soldier."

"Yes, sir." He exhaled, shifted his feet apart, let his head loll a little on his shoulders.

"Sleeping on guard duty and failure to obey a direct order."

"Yes, sir."

"You understand these are serious offenses?"

"Yes, sir."

"You understand why, soldier?"

Georgie could easily produce at least *one* why but wasn't sure it was the correct one, or the one solicited, or even if he were supposed to propose one at all.

"I think so, Sir. You don't want the enemy to come upon you unawares. And you can't let people choose to obey or not."

"Exactly. So why didn't you stay awake three nights ago at the ammo dump at zero two plus thirty hours? You didn't mind if the enemy came upon us unawares, as you put it?"

A trick question. Automatically Georgie worked the math to convert to the civilian clock, as if the trick lay in that puzzle rather than in the beat-your-wife mode of it. Meanwhile, the Colonel rose and strolled to the windows. He was bald with a monk's grey fringe horseshoeing his skull. He wore the wireless-rimmed spectacles of a bank clerk. He leaned into the window as if expecting someone in particular to walk past. Camp Roberts boasted the largest parade ground in the nation - four football fields in length - and always when you looked across it a dozen recruit platoons were practicing close-order drill separated from one another by what seemed acres of space and so distant they looked like gliding rectangles of green. The focus of the Colonel's attention, however, was local.

"Sir?"

"Report there on my desk from the infirmary says you had an epileptic seizure in the stockade last night. Do you have epilepsy?"

His face bloomed hot as a blast from a stove door swung open. "Sir, is *that* what happened to me?"

The officer peered harder into the pane at his nose then suddenly raised a knuckle and rapped sharply on the glass. A dome of glossy auburn hair bobbed across the sill; the colonel's left eye twitched, he flashed the passerby a "V" sign. His jaw muscle stretched as if he might be puckering and Georgie thought too late to check the reflected face for that. Apparently the case of Pvt. Karacek was but an *entr'acte* in a soap opera of fraternization.

"You tell me." He turned, mission complete, and took his chair. Now he seemed deflated, even disgruntled. Before Georgie could reply, he went on. "Lucky for you I'm a doctor as well as an officer, so I'm somewhat familiar with the condition. Nobody your age - you're, what, thirty - would be surprised by this. Don't bullshit me, soldier. I don't know how you got almost eleven weeks into training without anybody knowing, but we do now. No point in denying it. You got your choice. You can have a dishonorable for that nap you took and for refusing to snap to when the sergeant of the guard ordered it -- which if truth be known you were probably in a *petit mal* state of *absawnce* and he didn't know that -- or you can take a medical and go back home where you belong."

The colonel pulled a smile to one side of his mouth as if he intended to be taken as a kindly, understanding fellow, but Georgie heard *back home to the gimps and nuts and girls*.

"Aw, sir! Please! Okay, yeah, I've had it since I was six. I didn't mention it when I joined because I hadn't had a grand mal in a good while, and I was hoping it wouldn't matter. I was --"

"*Wouldn't matter!?*" The officer snatched up Georgie's file and tossed it down for emphasis. "You were carrying live ammo in your M-1, soldier! What happens when you have a fit and jerk the trigger? You think any trooper wants to be in a fox hole with you while we're taking fire and you have a fucking *fit*? You think anybody can count on you for *anything*?"

That stung deep. He might crack wise about the Krauts using redheaded nurses as distractions, but he tucked that one away. "I take your point, sir, about handling the rifle. But there's plenty else I can do. I know radios and dogs. I can type, too. Either something like that or limited service, sir. And I was thinking about working in the mess. An army fights on its stomach, they say, and I can man a griddle. I --"

"That's what we use those colored troops for."

"Sir, I'm not too proud. I want to serve my country." He tried to capture the colonel's eye, but the officer had uncapped a pen, rolled the chair snug to the desk, and his wrist and elbow were carving a scrubwoman's gigue in the air with his hurried cursive. Deaf.

"Sir, I want my family to be proud." Georgie's chin trembled minutely. Last night's fit was a whopper and left crud gumming up his system. No food since sixteen hundred yesterday. His eyes watered. He grit his teeth to squelch a rising tide. For God's sake! Buck up. Do *not* blubber!

"Sir," he said, "I *need* for my family to be proud!"

The colonel looked up blankly as if he'd disposed of the case but had forgotten the Private was present.

"Go home to your wife, son. She'll be delighted to see you."