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Comforts

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Comforts

James Calvin Schaap

This is what Lammie's told us, once or twice, in pieces, chunks, in a card game or two or three. We remember. Our memories, after all, are divine, and we're very good at mysteries.

Westkapelle, province of Zeeland, the hamlet in which he was born and reared, sits closer to England than any other point in the Netherlands and was therefore heavily fortified against an invasion the German occupiers thought would inevitably be coming once a beachhead at Normandy was established and the battle for Antwerp begun. Bunkers had been sprouting like hard, gray toadstools from Westkapelle's spacious North Sea beaches for years already.

On three sides, the village is surrounded by water. It sits on the island of Walcheren, southeast Holland, overlooking the Schelde, a waterway the Allies had to open to bring its troops and supplies onto the European mainland for the march to Berlin.

The Germans weren't wrong. The invasion came ashore at the village of Westkapelle, the place where Lammert De Lange, just a boy, lived and moved and had his being. But for him, the invasion itself wasn't the story that changed his life.

Lammie left Holland after the war, when there was no farm on the coast of Walcheren to which to return, and the relatives who'd come to this country a generation earlier beckoned generously. In every way, Lammie De Lange grew up during the Nazi occupation; and when it ended, he said there was really nothing for him there anymore, his parents gone, the farm destroyed by a sea water deluge.

During the occupation, the underground had ways of communicating, ways of getting out the news. People knew who was a safe bet and who wasn't; and everyone knew the collaborators, neighbors who were often as bad as the SS. There

were ways of knowing it was coming, the bombardment, long before it did. When it did come, no one was surprised.

Lammie was 15, young enough to sidestep the conscription so many men from that tiny, isolated, and oh-so righteous community suffered when the Nazis packed them into trains and dragged them to Germany to work in their factories—no, to *slave* in their factories.

We've got vets galore up here, more and more of War World II vintage showing up daily; but on those occasions when Lammert De Lange starts into war stories, everything stops, even Rook. Even Izaak DeWild lends a good ear, and Izaak was at Antietam. No one else remembers enemies in the kitchen.

The underground made sure the word got out in Westkapelle, and when it did, so did the people. Those who kept their radios had heard the warning from the BBC, and leaflets dropped from the sky the day before, alerting them to the fact that Allied bombers would breach the dike that held the water back from fertile land, once claimed by the sea. The news was a blessing in the form of a warning, a warning about inevitable, collateral destruction, but a blessing because it gave Westkapelle opportunity to escape, he said, and suggested longed-for liberation. Listen, in every respect, *liberation* was a word I had to die to understand.

The Allies claimed the dike had to go. Not until after the war, he said, had he learned, as many did, that the Queen Wilhelmina tried to talk Churchill into not bringing all that destruction to her people and her land. But Churchill listened instead to Eisenhower because the military knew sea water would soften German defenses, making communication and mobility far more difficult—well, more muddied. When the Canadians would finally come ashore at Westkapelle, they could make their way east to Antwerp, meeting far less opposition.

“Sometimes maybe,” Lammie says, “it is better not to know what it is the Queen says.” It’s just a line he repeats, often with a smirk, when we’re playing cards; but for him that line has particular meaning. Up the hill here, Lammert De Lange is my Rook pal. And, yes, we have Rook—good night, this is heaven, after all. And when we play, we talk.

What fell first from the sky were leaflets with the word *Waarschuwing* underscored in boldface type—“*evacuatie!*” Still, people believed liberation was imminent, and the possibility made them rich in hope. Destruction would descend in the same deafening hours as freedom.

Endless echelons of Allied bombers were nothing new in the gray North Sea skies over Westkapelle; but just a day later, on October 3, some early birds dropped markers, targets, when Lammert was threshing. When he saw them, he took his mother to a nearby farm on higher ground because he’d told her already the day before, when people were already leaving, that they too would evacuate once red markers were glowing—Christmas trees, people called them. He’d seen it before, how the Allies operated: first the markers, then the bombing.

He couldn’t help thinking, he said, that running away was silly because wherever they would go, on foot or horseback, there would be other military targets. War was, by 1944, as familiar as the seasons in Westkapelle, but the bloody battle they all knew would come was now imminent.

When the firestorm began, he watched in glee for which he would not apologize, if apologies were required up here, and they’re not. “One of the times the bombs dropping onto the sea dyke exploded, they flung the bodies of those Germans high into the air,” he said. “I saw arms and legs falling off in mid-air. It was a gruesome sight, but I laughed.”

There’s no guilt here, hard as that is to believe. You shouldn’t think that what he admitted at that moment was confession or testimony—he was not telling us the story as if to defile what we once were, or glory in bliss now ours. Our trespasses are so far behind us as to be forever gone. We tell stories, even stories like this, to explain to ourselves not just what we were, but what we are. And the oddity is that the stories we tell are really all the same, even though none of them are.

It comes in pieces, Lammie’s story, pieces we assemble, even though it’s not labor for him to tell it nor agonizing for us to hear. Really, this is the first time he’s ever put them all together himself. That happens with all of us, and it’s a joy, hard as that might be to believe.

Lammert and his mother—his father had been absent for a long time, hiding from the SS—took refuge in a hole in the ground when the British Lancasters appeared, the second wave. There the two of them were, he says, in a hole in the ground, up high enough to avoid the sea water and far enough away from the destruction created by Tall-boy bombs opening craters hundreds of meters wide and long, he says.

Hitler himself gave commands that all those bunkers were fortresses, meant to be lost only when the last man spent his last shell. Some vets up here were at the Bulge, some at Normandy, some worked the motor pool all the way to Berlin. But Lammie’s story is uniquely his, from the inside, and he was just a kid.

Lammie says he was more afraid than he ever was when it began, shaking in a way he could not control. Even though there were moments when debris showered down like hail, some of that fear subsided. “You can’t shake with fear for two whole hours,” he told us, even if the ground beneath your feet is waving as if it were a flag, undulating with the relentless concussion.

When he and his mother left that hole in the ground, a handful of Nazi soldiers stumbled by, broken, wandering emptily, as if they had lost any means of determining home. “In my ears there was nothing but the pounding,” he said, “but my heart filled with gladness.”

English is his second language, not that it makes a difference. We get it.

Lammert De Lange is apple-cheeked, tall and thin as a poplar. His strawberry hair, dry as straw, simply won’t be coddled, so he runs around here with rooster tails that make us smile. Salvation doesn’t curl your hair or put it into some smooth wave, just in case you harbor such delusions. Lammie is handsome these days only because he is redeemed, as he’ll be happy to say. He is here among the beloved, and he’s no longer trying to rebuild the dyke that was breached in his heart in 1944.

Nothing in the way he carries himself these days suggests wounds, but I do wish he’d take the

blind more than he does. He's not as competitive as some, not as brave, which suggests that some of us might be cowards or untowardly brash, words that have no meaning now. When some of that story comes out, we stop shuffling, not because he insists but because we prefer to listen. If things had been different, Lammie might have been a preacher because most everything he tells us has the moral spin one might expect of someone close to God. We all are, of course, but some of us speak differently, even today.

When finally the bombing relented, my good friend Lammie, as able-bodied as he is, was recruited to recover the bodies of a few dozen people—maybe more—from the wreck of a windmill, the place they'd taken refuge when the attack had begun, a place thought strong enough to withstand the assault.

Someday, perhaps, some Brit pilot in a quiet graveyard in Southborough or Berwick-upon-Tweed or Peacehaven will realize that one of the bombs he dropped that night miscarried fatefully. It veered away from its intended target, hit a windmill, and killed innocent human beings, men and women and children who, like Lammert, may have been cheering at that very moment—or praying. In a town as religious as Westkapelle, they could have been on their knees thanking the Lord God almighty for bringing in the Allies to wrest the jackboot from their throats. To imagine them huddled in prayer at the moment that bomb crashed into the windmill is chilling, and don't think we don't ourselves go zero at the bone at the thought.

A direct hit crushed that sturdy place of refuge, trapping the people inside. Some died instantly, but others lived to experience an even more difficult *deliverance*—and I mean that word in our sense, not yours, although it might be. First there came the bombs, then the resulting flames, then sea water rushing in through the dyke that was no longer there—a crashing sound Lammert says he will never forget, even now. Those poor folks who hadn't died were buried under timbers impossible to push away when the water came. They had no means of escape. Those who weren't killed by the errant bomb or burned in the fiery tumult were drowned in the deluge. Forty-some.

What does he remember? Maybe we should say, what is it that he cannot or will not forget?

These things:

The way a couple he knew were found together, pinned beneath a rafter, their little girl, their only child, in the arms of her father, her mother arms desperately wrapped around her husband; bloated bodies clinging to the walls as if still climbing to escape the rising water; another child, a boy with a harmonica still stuck in his pocket—his mother may have told him to take it along to play while they waited for the end of the bombardment; how unwieldy it was to lift those bloated bodies through the tangled mess that was once a windmill.

All of us up the hill might have returned to Westkapelle when he told the story, might have visited all that suffering ourselves—we can do such things, and we have. We might simply have turned back our clocks and watched the story happen; but Lammert De Lange did not invite us and would have no part of going back or bringing anyone else back either. He tells the story without tears, but not without flinching.

A baby buggy with diapers still neatly stacked inside; pieces of soap to clean up and await the liberation; a bag with jewelry and a watch—precious things. A child's piggy bank. Bread. Cheese. And, of course, those dead bodies, some of them floating; and all over, wherever the rescuers walked, thick and sticky mud, brackish sea water everyone knew would choke whatever crops were still in October fields.

Elsewhere, horses stood in water up to their bellies, he says. Animals—wild and domesticated—fled en masse from the flood. Cousins and their children found dead in a bomb shelter made from reeds and plaster slats.

He doesn't talk about that time very much, and we don't ask because we're not given any more to what amounts to idle speculation. We have no need whatsoever for action movies. But that doesn't mean we don't know stories. We do. It's just that they don't weigh us down once we sprout the wings of angels. I'm not being silly. Death frees you up but good—something you might want to remember.

Only once have I seen Lammie stagger at the telling—and you shouldn't think the war is an obsession. He would be happy to admit that he spent more time than he should have, more tears, more sleepless nights mulling over that horrible October, both before he left the Netherlands and then

even here, the war far behind him. Those days were what he thought constantly about during those long hours he pulled the rotary hoe or the cultivator, tending his crops on that John Deere that served him so mightily.

Only once did I see him forget the cards in his hand. There was no special reason why the discussion moved in the direction of the war, even though Les Meerfeld and Dirk Visser were there too, both of them in Europe. It started with the thwack, thwack of the medical helicopter that flies out to small-town hospitals to retrieve accident victims or heart attacks, maybe a stroke. It's a troubling sound that stops us doing whatever we're about because we can't help employing our own little GPS systems the moment we hear it, wondering who and when and why may well be joining us here up the hill.

Silence fell—which is not all that unusual. That helicopter flew on farther east, its racket falling lower in the register. There we sat at a game. We can and do dream green felt card tables into existence when someone fetches a deck, and the four of us were sitting comfortably beneath that giant maple just west of the bandstand.

It happened at the mill, he said, when, together with a dozen other men, they were pulling the rafters out of the awful mess where bodies still bobbed in sea water. It was, for a time, hand to hand, like a bucket brigade, a couple dozen men and boys at rescue work with nobody to rescue. At times, they could and did hitch up the horses to move what couldn't be jerked away by hand, by manpower; but for the most part, the old Theune Mill was so splintered that getting at bodies jammed hopelessly in the debris was a matter of pulling out shards of wood and tons of rock, piece by soaked piece, field stone by deadly field stone.

They had just removed the body of his cousin, a boy only three years younger than he was, his arm a misshapen mess; but bearing no other wounds, which made it likely he had drowned in the rising waters. Lammie was one of a dozen men up the line, when a big chunk of torn wood, a half-door, got passed along, a piece the size of a kid's snow sled, enough anyway for each of them to have to open his arms, he said.

"It was all so fast," he told us. "We were an ant hill, trying to get at those bodies because we wanted still to believe that we might yet find someone

down there breathing maybe." He poked his glasses up farther on his nose as if to see his cards, but he wasn't thinking about his hand. "This door," he said, gesturing, "it had in white lettering a message painted on that red barn paint, as if a child maybe took a thin brush, you know, and made the words." He raised his hand as if he were doing the painting himself.

Listen, weather doesn't matter to us. We control it—well, we control ourselves, you might say. If I say it was a gorgeous night, it's only for your benefit. I want you to see what was all around. For us, there are no more storms.

"What did it say?" Dirk asked him, "What did that message spell out?"

"It was in Dutch," Lammie told us.

We have no need of translators, and he knows it. Behind us the strafing sound of that helicopter's blades hadn't yet receded into silence.

He looked up at each of us, eyes sweeping around the table as if he were about to surprise us with good tidings. Then, as if shifting gear, they went into a stare as deep as anything I've seen, a blank, contemplative lapse into distinct memory.

Time being of little importance, we waited. This part we didn't guess, didn't know.

Finally, Dirk: "No trespassing."

Lammie shook his head.

"Milk for sale,' I bet," Les said. "Cheese. Cream or something. Fish?—herring maybe."

Lammie smiled at the silliness. He poked a finger in the air as if he were, just then, taking an important call.

"John 3:16," I said.

What Lammie was going through inflicted no pain in him. The demure smile that arose from his thin lips held no scorn or dismay, and he seemed not to register our silliness. He was, of course, covering up no brittle anxiety because, hard as it is to imagine, we live now in a world where there is real transparency, no camo.

"There I was standing with this door in my hands, as wide as my chest," he spread his arms shoulder-width, showing us the cards in his hand, which is not a death-like mistake. Then he looked down at that thing which wasn't in his arms, but once was. "My only comfort,' it said," and with his pointer finger he drew out the words in the empty air before him. "Here," he said, and just like that the tattered door was in his arms, a chunk of

weathered wood wide as the front gate.

All of us knew what was written there, a shibboleth for us and for him, the first line of the answer to the first question of the catechism all of us knew since we were children.

He rested the bottom edge of the door on the felt, put his cards down, then stood and looked down at what we all saw painted sloppily but clearly across the wood, a little sermon someone in the dark had taken a moment to inscribe while emptying his brush on a door that was now blown apart in the bombardment. “My only comfort is that I belong to my faithful Savior,” Lammie said, as if reading the words for the very first time.

You may think of us as children. That’s fair. We have this divine sense of knowing exactly where stories will go, like children do, as if we’ve even heard them before forever. But great too is the joy in the telling, maybe especially those that don’t get told often, and probably never, or very rarely, in the scattered darkness, which is your world.

We knew that more was coming, knew it in our own hearts, even though none of us had ever removed drowned men and women and children from a windmill in Westkapelle, a place where none of us had ever been. We knew there was more as a child knows, and we longed to hear it all played out.

There Lammert de Lange stood, looking down at the lettering, like a teacher might look at something important he wanted his students to note, Lammert who’d never been anything but a milker. A good one, I might add, but a man who spent his whole life in a barn. There he stood, a wise man.

“I held it just for a moment in my hands,” he told us, “just for a moment and then on, you know, I give it up to the next man in line, like all that rubbish we lifted from that mess. But I held it long enough to read what it said, and I told myself,” he shook his head as if he couldn’t believe it, “—I was just a kid, and there we stood with all those good people dead right behind, uncovered still, something I watched in my mind for the rest of my life—that picture, I mean, of all of us there and clearing away the bodies of people who loved the Lord with all their hearts and believed every word of what this this means.” Then stopped,

what seemed mid-sentence. “And I said to myself, what kind of idiot truly believes such nonsense?”

Silence. Again. But we all smiled then. I swear it, we all smiled. Such is life after death.

Me?—I was, in life, in a wheelchair, a victim of polio when I was just a boy, my freedom to roam forever circumscribed once I lost my legs. If you’re wondering, it’s true—up the hill, I dance. Dirk Visser took shrapnel somewhere between Normandy and the German border and couldn’t return to carpentry, the job he missed so badly during his three years as a GI. Les Meerfeld never made it out of an office but lost a brother in Korea and a wife to ovarian cancer.

No one has Lammie’s stories, but we all knew that what someone had painted on that door, English or Dutch, was meant to offer suffering souls divine comfort, even before the bombardment, even as they anticipated the horror that reigned from the sky in the name of a liberation they’d prayed about for years. We weren’t there with Lammie, but we all know that comfort too, because once upon a time each of us up here has also known to feel little more in your heart than despair. We were, all of us, human after all.

No one else can tell Lammie’s story, not even me. But everyone up here understands it very well, the lament, the doubt, the horror, the sadness, the fists. Every one of us has stood there at some pit that held in its maw little more than sorrow and death.

For us, rich pleasure rises from such stories in a manner—believe me—you have yet to discover. It’s impossible to explain to a human mind—and for that I apologize. I retell it now because it is real and it is true, and for a saint like me, it’s worth trying, if I may be so bold. I’ve still got some humanness in me—I’d like to try.

Once Lammie said it to each of us, to all of us—“what kind of idiot believes such nonsense?”—we all nodded, idiots in so many ways, all of us smiling because we know for sure now what it is to be redeemed.

For some of us, how hard it is to believe.

Yet we can’t not.

Praise be his holy name.