

Piccolo

At 5:00am, the time bombardments began, the war was over. The Bosches turned their backs on the Rhine, checkering the horizon in a slow retreat on the far side of the river. A castle stood alone on the slopes as a reminder of a time before such a war. The last ferries loaded with weary soldiers shuttled across the Rhine. Quaint villages, with church steeples and erect buildings surrounded by foliage, were nestled against the river at the base of the gorge. Smooth, upward sloping banks, rich and fertile, embraced the defeated soldiers. Remnants of war in the plains stretching above Alsace looked down on the Rhine's slopes with envy. This side of the river, rain drops pattered upon the victors' metal helmets. It had been that way during the war.

A contingent of soldiers stood in a line atop the verdant gorge overlooking the Rhine. Their metal helmets had a deflector crest along the axis. Each identical helmet was embossed with the insignia of a grenade. Color guards each held a flag: one for the United States, and one flying the colors of France for the regiment, while the Colonel marched, cane in hand, down the line. "Officially, we're not supposed to be here. But we are here. Remember that." The Colonel paused, glancing around before being arrested by the hazel eyes of Piccolo, his youngest soldier with amber skin. "While colored soldiers are not considered front-line A.E.F. soldiers, you fought in the front lines with France."

All chins raised. The Colonel nodded, puffed his chest out, and patted Piccolo before continuing down the column. "If Patriotism is defined based on sacrifice...you are the greatest patriots America has yet to know." The Colonel's skin became pasty in the musky dew, while he gazed upon every shade of black, brown, and beige. "I have one last mission to ask of you," he

said. “However you get there, whether the medic takes you or you limp. If you can run, run. Make sure you touch the river. President Wilson and General Pershing would spit fire to know this honor is yours. Major Nugat and I did it yesterday for the regiment. Today, do it for yourselves.”

Moments passed. The soldiers stood at attention. Suddenly, Piccolo broke from the ranks. He sped down the hill. His raucous cry drowned the sounds of nature. When he reached the edge of a crumbling, cobblestone bridge, he halted. He was the first soldier to cross the Rhine. He observed the slumped shoulders of the last haggard vestiges of the Kaiser’s army. The lone soldier’s sigh materialized before him as he waved farewell to the Bosches. “Feels like I just lost a bunch of friends,” he said in a dry, raspy tenor.

The image in the glassy Rhine caught his eye briefly. It reflected the mud collected in every pore and under the quick of every nail. A German soldier turned. He was smiling. Piccolo stared at him, before turning toward his own battered regiment. His comrades smiled more and grunted less when they were marching to the next battle. As he watched the squadron’s precarious journey to the river, his expression became grim as he recognized one particular trooper.

The soldier approached, gun in hand, aiming at the retreating Germans, making it recoil while imitating the cracking sound. “Looka them Bushes! Thought we was coming to get them, they did. See them limp! We beat them Bushes, we did. Piccolo! We beat them.”

“Stop it Herbie.”

“You ain’t the boss of me.”

“War’s over.”

“Maybe I can get it started again.” Laughing over the idea, Herbie continued, “I’m just messing.”

“If one officer gets hurt cuz of you, I’ll do more than boss you around.”

“You’d defend a white man against your black brother?”

“My brother’s name is Peter. He’s older.”

“I got a brother too. Stevie. Twins, you know. You served in the pit with him a time or two, now I think about it.”

“How could I forget?”

“Don’t know. You seem to be forgetting whose side you on these days.” Herbie spat. “Waving to Bushes.”

“Divisions are as soft and numbered as sand, they say,” said Piccolo. “Don’t they say something like that?”

“Race is hard. It ain’t sand.”

“It should be.”

“Maybe. See if you say that when we States-side again,” Herbie paused to skim the river. He gathered and pocketed a few Rhinestones from the banks. “Sunny over there,” he said. “Like the war never happened. It’ll be like war never happened in the States too. Mark my words.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. Maybe you would know that too if them letters got to their destination.”

Piccolo stiffened. “I know I got letters to deliver.”

“Letters.” Herbie spat again. “Letters you ain’t never sent. You got more letters than sense—”

“Told you once not to talk about my letters,” Piccolo warned, taking a step closer to Herbie.

“—decorations, weapons combined—”

“Say what you want. But if’n you ever see fit to finish that sentence...I’ll show you how to use a Lebel. One. Good. Time,” Piccolo’s voice cooled to his own ears. No matter how thick the wool, their uniforms couldn’t keep the chill out. “You always said I was the only one who could use the rifle for more than a bludgeon. I didn’t get to shoot Germans today. You’d make as good a target as any. My eyes are still keen as ever. You still light on your feet?”

Herbie stepped up to Piccolo leaving a hair’s breadth between. “You lookin’ for a fight?”

“Wright!”

“Sir, Sergeant Judge, sir!” Herbie saluted, nearly clipping Piccolo’s nose with his helmet.

“Go see Lieutenant France,” said Sgt. Judge.

“This ain’t over Tintton. You remember that,” said Herbie.

“Go on, Hothead. Sergeant Judge just gave you an order,” said Piccolo.

Herbie stalked off, but not before sneering at Piccolo with a long, hard, unmistakably menacing look. Private Wright's natural grace remained visible in every quick step toward the back of the soldiers' line as Sgt. Judge continued his approach. Once he neared Piccolo, he lowered his voice, "Jasper'll take care of him. He's the only one who can get the Wright brothers in line."

"Hey Cecil. Nice to see you."

"That's Sergeant Judge to you," Cecil said. With the uniform and pack under the helmet, Cecil resembled a turtle whose brown head poked out of its shell.

Piccolo mock saluted down as he replied, "It is Sir, Sergeant Judge, sir, now."

Cecil chuckled at Piccolo's playful mockery. "Should I call you Piccolo, now? You going home? War's over."

"Is it?"

"They say it is."

"I think I'd rather fight," Piccolo said.

Cecil stepped back when Piccolo turned to him with a feverish gaze. "At ease."

"I don't think that's possible."

"You being at ease or going home?"

"Told Herbie, I'd do something if'n his antics hurt one of you officers. You ain't white. But you an officer. The war is over. Does it matter?"

“Does anything matter? I hope so.” Cecil surveyed the area as he continued, “I hope so...” lingering on the words as though he recalled a favorite song. “I think it has to.”

“When I was a boy, I wanted to matter,” Piccolo answered while looking about him. “All this and I’m still no more than a boy.”

“A Doughboy, a Tommy, et Poilus. Ah, the French infantry!” Cecil eased down the side of the bridge, planting his trench-booted feet in the river like a tree. Everyone would touch the river, but Piccolo was the first to cross the bridge. “We been all; everything out here. Jasper, I mean Lieutenant France, is proud of that—but the letters?”

“I’m still writing them,” Piccolo answered.

“When will you deliver them?”

“I only promised to write them.”

“That’s no good.” Cecil’s brows came together.

“Since when was we good?” Piccolo asked.

“We are the best. We won.”

“Don’t feel much like I won anything.”

“That’s not good,” said Cecil.

“The best ain’t good. You know? That’s what I question most. Should of died on that battlefield. I’d be good then. My life would mean something or I wouldn’t have time to care. All I

got now is time.” Catching Cecil’s eye, he continued, “I didn’t break no promises. All this and I never became a man. Not that we could ever be men. I ain’t never broke no promises.”

“Everyone breaks promises.”

“You right about that. Probably why I’m here. Every, that sob, did...” Piccolo’s voice trailed off. His mind drifted with the current as his fingers touched the waters. He knew another river that echoed a similar melody. He’d been not too far from it, playing as a child. “The squitos used to turn my arms into mountain ranges.” He chuckled, pausing, remembering a time and place where chewing the thick, humid air was more common than chewing tobacco. “I wanted to matter. Kernel Hayes would say that’s the key. He’s probably right.”

Piccolo replayed Colonel Hayes’ words prior to the order to touch the Rhine, “Anyone who cannot grow can only cease to exist as a note in time never played—” something about “a bar never written; played in time but never recorded to be shared, in memory but not to be recalled, or to the heart but never to resonate and repeat into perpetuity.” Piccolo understood the words, but they meant more to Cecil and Jasper who hung on the speeches like gospel. But he could not help but enjoy when Hayes spoke using his Harvard turns of phrase, “It may be that in the grand scheme of things, the note, the beat, the person, while at one point present, never existed at all; nevertheless, a human always wants to exist and by extension to matter...”

The wind blew a steady breeze that carried the faint scent of cinnamon. The river was not too far away, gurgling in the background to record the moment in time. Trees swayed, their leaves brushing with other branches and leaves to replicate the strumming chords of a bluesy guitar.

Isolated unclipped hedgerows played the long passages of fences. They plucked the lines of foliage to play nature like a banjo. A few pleasantly surprised sharecroppers swore they tasted the wind as their noses turned up. Then the sweat-basted men went back to crouching, curling their limbs to wrap tightly around the bulbs and painstakingly separate the white puffy flower from its stalk. A brilliant tweet was answered by a squalling songstress as birds crossed the skies, evolving the original melody whistled with each bar.

“Piccolo!” cried a young voice.

“Go home,” ordered Piccolo’s even younger one. A woolly head connected to amber tinted skin poked up, barely able to see over the tall grass and cotton crops. A piccolo was tethered loosely to his neck by thin braided strips of leather.

“Only if you come with me.”

“No.”

“Mama’s gonna get us if we’s late.”

“Hush! He’s comin.”

“Who’s comin?”

One tall, gangly fellow walked along the road between decrepit wooden fences bordering oceans of green fields with lonely islands of dark men moving painstakingly slow within the depths of their midst. With only a pocket knife that he flicked open and close ever so often, a ruddy knapsack, the shabby straw hat on his head and the threadbare clothes on his back, he moved to a

song no one else could hear. Placing one foot in front of the other, each step became lighter. Streams of perspiration cascaded down his rippling, polished ebony skin, catching in coils of hair and staining the remains of his shirt. The man walked due west on the Public Road. Homes and buildings gathered together in the background. His father before him had slaved and worked in similar fields. Laboring for his owner as a slave and into debt once free. The sun beat into his rich, brown skin, whipping him like no other man could. Like the other men in the fields inhabiting Piccolo's mind, the man never reached his full height. Each sang his own version of a spiritual while tilling a plot of land. They prayed for better weather for the dark folk in the fields picking cotton, working in the canebrakes, or dragging timber. Every now and again, the gangly fellow would use his thunderous voice to answer their calls.

The man turned toward the tall sweeping grass, where the boys stood within the downy, white fireworks painting the field. "Shouldn't you boys be gettin' home?" he asked. "Bet your ma getcha if'n you's late for dinner. Peter, shouldn't you be getting your brother home?"

"That's what I told him."

"Where you goin'?" asked Piccolo.

"Go'n go Turner. Go'n tell my aunt bout my Pa."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Peter whispered.

"But don't she live in Helena? That's the other way." The man hesitated a step, forcing the boys traveling alongside him like a herald of dolphins in the ocean of cotton to stop. "Ow!" Knowing what was coming next, the man chuckled at the boys, picking up his steps where he left

them, albeit slower in Piccolo's memory. Old mud anchored the grooves on the bottom of his shoes to the ground. "I mean I'm sorry for your loss too. But didn't she move last year?"

"How you know that?" The gangly man seemed to be perspiring more as the sun angled to focus on him alone, skipping over the dry cracked earth.

"Mama said so," said Piccolo. "Your Pa stopped by for a pie day before the accident—"

"Did he now?" he asked. "Tell your Ma I be stopping by when I get back."

"Missus Bell called you a hero," Piccolo answered in a voice filled with awe. Somehow he remembered the adult in his mind looking down on him grimacing, and likened the image to a cross between Jesus and the old Nat Turner posters.

"I ain't no hero."

"Missus Bell called you one. She also said Mista Johnny started—"

"I ain't no hero. Sounds to me that Missus just likes to be running her mouth."

"That's what Mama says."

"I ain't no hero. If'n you remember one thing bout today. You remember that." Piccolo did remember. The sun sank a little lower in his memory.

"I'm gonna be a hero one day."

The man scoffed, "You do that. See where it gets you." As an afterthought he continued. "Shouldn't you boys be in school?"

“That’s tomorrow. I get my first marker then,” said Piccolo.

“Marka?”

“Mama’s gonna give me one—mark the door. I’m bettin I’m taller than my brother was.”

“No you’re not. You’re a runt,” Peter argued.

“Am not!”

“Are so! You’ll see. Each year you go to school you’ll get a mark.”

“How many marks did you get? My brother’s got three.”

“No,” said Peter. “I have two. I’ll have three.”

“Ma didn’t give no markas. Never held no charks in her life. If’n she did. I’da had one.”

“I’ll get my first one,” Piccolo said. “Tomorrow.”

The ebony man kept walking toward his unknown destination with a slow rhythm in his step, whis’mming a tune with his lips. At least the folks round Elaine called it whis’mming when they half-whistled and half-hummed their spirituals while singing only the calls or responses. The boys, his not-so-silent companions, moved with him, only a row of cotton and a little grass and dirt between them, as they whis’mmmed back.

“Piccolo! Someone’s coming.”

A buggy drawn by two whinnying horses, one a speckled gray, its mate creamy milk chocolate, made its way toward them on the road. The team would kick and stamp at flies while screaming at mosquitos. Their tails flicked. Eager to dance away from their troubles, as if they would not follow, the horses pranced sideways in opposing directions. They hoofed a beat, kicking up dust and steam from the road. Each step clacked a syncopated percussion to carry the melody created by the wind and birds. The man driving the team was forced to pull the reins and, every so often, exact a swift strike of his whip on their buttocks, cracking the air like a rim shot on a snare, to force them to adhere to his will.

“You boys stay hidden where you is. You hear?” The boys nodded in agreement. “Be quiet. Don’tcha move none till the coast be clear.”

The driver pulled up alongside Piccolo’s hero with a friendly grin overcast by the shadow of the brown, bowler hat on his head. The young man kept his head slightly down angling his head so that the right side remained out of view to the driver and his passenger. “Hi Mista Johnny,” said the young man on foot in greeting. “I sees you is just been making it back home again.”

“Avery, my friend. How are you? How’s Elaine been?”

“She good Sir.” The ebony man answered.

“And your father? Last I heard, he was ill. I—”

“He knew he wasn’t ill!” The wind echoed the Grecian chorus’ whispers.

“Piccolo!”

“He did. He caused it. Wasn’t like he got the flu or con-con...”

“Consumption.”

“That’s it!”

“Did you hear something?” Johnny asked. Careful to keep his nose under the hat, while looking up and around revealing that he had coordinated his suit and tie to match his hair and eyes.

The gangly man shrugged, picking up a twig, peeling it cleanly to a point. After passing the point between his teeth briefly, he threw it over his shoulder into the grass to his right.

“Ow!” The gangly man did the same with a second twig, shifting slightly so it landed a foot or two away.

“Hey!”

“Ah didn’t hear nothing sir. Nothing ‘ceptin the wind and the field hands.”

“Ok. Back to...” Johnny paused to gulp, “your father. I heard he had taken a turn for the worst.”

“He died t’day,sir.” Johnny’s brow furrowed as nodded slowly. The lean man on foot continued, adding, “I be on ma way to Turner to tell his sister.”

“That’s good, my man.” Johnny clapped him on the back. While not so young a pale man with bright, unfettered eyes, he was a joyous sort, without malice in his face. His jaw was square and firm. A prim, honeyed blonde woman sat next to him in a pink dress. She had a secretive smile

on her face as she gazed at the man before them. “Avery, this is Esther Hart, my wife, rather my new bride. Esther, this is Avery. This young man is one of this town’s finest, and a good friend. We just came from her family’s home in Lambrook.”

Esther tipped her head. Johnny’s friend tilted his own head in greeting. He never looked at her. “I be seeing congratulations is in order. Ev’ry ma’am just like he said.” Esther wrinkled her pretty, turned up nose as if picking up on something that would soon make her sneeze.

“Every or Avery, Sir?” she asked.

“It don’t mattah much, ma’am. Either be fine.”

“But only one can be your name?” she pressed.

He raised his head looking her in the eye, nodding carefully before speaking. “The name’s Ev-ver-ry ma’am. Ev’ry Turner.” Esther’s irises narrowed while her pupils dilated, nearly hiding the whites of her large eyes as her lids peeled back. Placing her hand to the brooch over her chest, she stifled a squeak by biting down on her lip. His right eye’s pupil was a solid wall of light heather gray with a steely iris. The lid had been cut back, and there was no lash. His face could have been pieced and melded together on the right. The left side, in contrast, was smooth and attractive.

“You mean I’ve been calling you the wrong name all these years!” Johnny Hart’s laugh was incredulous. Clapping his hands together while maintaining a strong grip on the reins, he missed his wife’s reaction altogether. “Every. You should have told me.”

“It wouldn’t fittin, Mista Johnny,” Every smiled on his attractive left side.

Johnny Hart's good-natured laugh and humor rang out, bringing Every and Esther to their heels with laughter. "No, I suppose you're right." Johnny pondered. "Some folks round town wouldn't call it proper for you to correct me at all," he paused dramatically, then lowered his voice while glancing around like he perceived eyes watching him. "But I don't really care about what those people think." A friendly silence settled as he sighed. "It's all just a misunderstanding then."

Peter whispered, "I can't hear!"

"Hush! They'll hear you," Piccolo whispered louder.

"Esther, did you hear something?"

Esther, having recovered from her initial shock, giggled and Every smiled. "No Sir, you never did."

Johnny's eyes caught the grass and fields. Then he shook his head, nearly dropping the whip, forcing him to look down. He blinked. "Best tell Dunley some of his cotton's going bad. It's been a long time since it rained. Didn't know Boll Weevil had made it all the way here."

Piccolo snickered. Every turned toward the grass, shook his head, and looked up, shifting down the road to get going. "I tell'm. I Promise."

Johnny pointed his thumb in the direction of Turner before waving his friend off with fingers splayed on both hands. "I'll let you go now. Might be a lil' spooky after dark. Once Esther and I settle in together, I'll stop by."

“Sound mighty good, Sir. Mighty good. You’ll meet my son then.” With a bow, Every walked on, waving Johnny Hart off and leaving.

“Be off with you now, Turner,” said Johnny. The sun descended rapidly, hovering just above the trees. As Every Turner left Elaine headed due west, Johnny picked up the reins and cracked the horses to a start, ready to bring his new wife into his home. Johnny turned around several times, appearing unsettled, but Every never looked back. “Must be eyes in every field and tree,” Johnny muttered, shaking off the jitters before shrinking down the lane. A rhythmic gust shook the grassy fields into a country dance, revealing two sets of still eyes in their midst. Had Johnny turned at that moment, he would have known nothing was wrong with Dunley’s cotton.

“Can we go now?” asked Peter.

“Sure. We can go.”

“Piccolo, I didn’t hear anything.”

“Don’t worry. I saw everything.”

ALTERNATE VERSION

He raised his head looking her in the eye, nodding carefully before speaking. “The name’s Ev-ver-ry ma’am. Ev’ry Turner.” Peter tugged Piccolo back. He frowned at the scene. Everyone knew what looking at white women meant in these parts. Mr. Johnny’s wife didn’t seem to take

it well, and Peter stealthily moved them both deeper into the cotton field, obscuring Mr. Johnny from their view. He could tell they were discussing things, mostly likely Every's overstep.

Peter whispered, "I can't hear!"

"Hush! They'll hear you," Piccolo whispered louder.

Eventually Every turned to look toward them and took a step forward allowing the boys to have a better view of Mr. Johnny. They couldn't make out the words, but at least they could see the road and the buggy.

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Cecil's voice snapped Piccolo out of his memories. He was in a different field, but a field nonetheless. No cotton blew kisses from the ground. Instead rain pelted his helmet. He heard the affectionate patter drum on Cecil's too. Cecil had been lecturing him, probably for several minutes, but Piccolo only heard, "Don't forget to remember that we are the best. Because when we get back, the world will remember to forget." Piccolo stared at the barren landscape behind him noting the slimy puddles of fuel. Distant trees were toppled or riddled with holes. Tracks from men, animals, and machines wore into the overused carpet of grass—the spoils of victory.

"That's no good, either," Piccolo said.

"Then deliver those letters."

"But that means I have to go back to the beginning."

"Jasper says, 'Every human has to stare down his past.' It doesn't linger there. The past, present, and future are the same," Cecil lectured. He stepped up to Piccolo's side.

"That doesn't leave much to hope for."

"There's always hope."

"That's what we fought for isn't it? I saw so much, but I never saw that."

Making a cradle with his arms, Cecil answered, "Hope is something to hold." His eyes were innocent, beady coals that looked past the haze to the invisible sun on the other side.

"Like the past?" Piccolo asked. Cecil's smile grew. "He left it behind, you know?"

“Who? Who left what behind?”

“I know a man who left it all behind him.”

“Know or knew?”

“It doesn’t matter. He did.”