live what life your broken heart can

by superstargirl

Summary

(he’s 20 when he enlists. 23 when the war is over. there is so much blood on his hands in the aftermath that sometimes he can’t breathe.)

A lot of you will die, Gene thinks to himself, and no one will ever know what you did for your country except the person beside you. And the man who tries to save your life.

Notes

Hiya! So this story has been in the works for quiiiiiiiiite some time, and it's a bit all over the place. But I hope you enjoy it! And for those of you wondering, my road trip au will be updated soon, I promise! Life has just been suuuuuuper hectic recently, but I promise I'll get onto ASAP! But I'm a sucker for BabeRoe and I couldn't resist writin' this lil thing!

Also, if it ends a little abruptly, I apologize - I wasn't really sure how to end it, so just did the best I could. Hope it's okay!

(title taken from 'uneven odds' by sleeping at last. he's a great artist and if you're looking for someone to check out, he's your dude!)
The first thing they teach you, as a medic, is that affection is dangerous, fondness is dangerous. The best things you can do are your job and to remove yourself from any and all situations where you could become partial to the boys in your company. They even type it out on official Army-Airborne Infantry paper that crinkles when it’s touched.

There are deaths that Gene can’t account for; lives lost in Normandy, bodies that are never found by the Airborne. The Germans would have gotten hands on them, would have stripped them clean. But their mother and father will never get to see their son’s broken body, the slashed throats by a Kraut blade, the bullet holes that look like gaping abysses in soldiers’ bodies.

Gene thinks that it’s probably for the best that the parents never see the broken shells their sons became in death.

He patches up enough men in Normandy that he starts to lose count. Originals, officers, new kids who just shipped in from Currahee or Toccoa. They’ve all got scrapes or bullet wounds, some have broken arms or snapped fingers or rope burn from being slung up in their chutes like little puppets on strings. Gene doesn’t ask, learns to keep his mouth shut while he tapes them up and sends them on their merry way.

He gets himself an office in Carentan – an abandoned home where he can lay out the wounded or the dying and fix what he can. He goes into combat in the town, hangs back and waits for someone to get injured. Or he pulls the wounded into a safe place. Lipton gets a bullet in the stomach, Tipper gets half his face blown off, and Captain Winters gets a ricochet that pierces his shin.

“Fuckin’ Krauts, I swear to God I’ll kill every single one of ‘em.” Liebgott hisses as he and Welsh bring Tipper in to the small room. Tipper is dropped onto a bed and Gene begins tending his wounds. “Fuckin’ Nazi pieces of shit, I’m gonna shoot every Kraut fuckin’ bastard I find.”

“Enough, Liebgott.” Gene snaps without looking up from Tipper’s wounds. “You wanna talk like that, do it outta here.” He can feel Liebgott’s eyes on him, narrowed and venomous, but Harry must say something because Liebgott mutters a curse word and stomps away.

“You’re gonna have to forgive him, Doc.” Harry says, looming in the doorway. “Lotta good men were killed today – lot of us are feeling the repercussions of it.”

“I know.” Gene mutters right as Winters comes in, leaning on Nixon for support. “I was there.”

Harry kind of blanks, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water, but Gene’s already shooed him away. Captain Winters’ wounds take precedence to Welsh’s hurt feelings.

65 men lost in Carentan; Gene hovers over the bodies he finds and prays to a god that he hopes is listening.

Malarkey comes in the night before they ship out with 10 bundles in his arms, each wrapped in butcher’s paper and tied with coarse string. “The, uh, the lady doin’ our laundry gave me these.” He says in lieu of greeting, holding out the packages. From the angle of the floor, Gene can just read out Albert Blithe written in thick letters. “Wanted me to help givin’ ‘em back. She don’t know those men are dead yet, Doc.”

Malarkey’s hands are shaking so badly that Blithe’s package drops into Gene’s lap. “Shit, sorry, Doc.” Malarkey mutters, reaching down to grab the fallen laundry. But, as he folds, the rest of the butcher-wrapped clothing items tumble into Gene’s lap as well. “Fuck.” Malarkey hisses, and he
drops to his knees.

He starts frantically gathering the laundry up, trying to carry the ten packages. Gene grabs his wrist and says, in a voice just above a whisper, “s’alright, Malarkey. S’okay.” Malarkey stills, Blithe’s laundry bundle clutched in trembling hands. He’s staring at the name written on the side in beautiful cursive, the letters wrapping around each other.

“Blithe-.” He chokes out, looking up to Gene as if the medic holds the answers to the world in the palm of his hand. “Blithe ain’t even dead yet, Doc. And here I am, actin’ as if he’s already in the ground and buried.” He laughs humorlessly, turning over the package. And then he looks back up, but his eyes aren’t so scared as they are pained. “It woulda been better to die than to live the way Albert’s gonna. Like he ain’t a war hero – no one’s ever gonna know what that man did for his country.”

A lot of you will die, Gene thinks to himself, and no one will ever know what you did for your country except the person beside you. And the man who tries to save your life.

Buck Compton gets shot in the ass and tells them to leave him there. Malarkey hesitates – Gene sees it in his gaze – but they push forward. As they’re leaving, Gene passes a replacement with two bullets in his chest. The replacement would have been dead before he hit the ground. “Didn’t even know his name!” Malarkey shouts over the sound of Kraut bombs and shells.

“Me either.” Gene murmurs. His heart aches at the thought that he was supposed to save that man, supposed to protect him in any way he could. And he didn’t even know the kid’s name.

George Luz, in all his goddamn glory, nicks some boxes of Lucky Strikes from Captain Nixon’s private stash. He comes swaggering into the aid station like he’s just robbed the White House.

“Whatsoever you’re sellin’,;” Gene says without glancing up from the replacement in front of him. The kid got a piece of shrapnel in his leg and is groaning so loud the whole tent is shaking. “I ain’t interested.”

“Not for sale, Doc.” Luz grins, tossing Gene a pack of Strikes. Gene grabs it out of midair and almost feels his jaw hit the ground. “For everyone’s favorite medic.” Luz bows with a flourish and exits, but not before tossing Gene a shit-eating smile and a wink.

“That’s some good tobacco, Doc.” Buck says from his bed in the corner – he’s lying on his chest with his pants pulled down and a blood-dotted bandage covering the hole in his butt.

Gene laughs softly and pulls two out. He gets up to give one to Buck and then puts one in his own mouth. He lights them both up and breathes smoke out in a hazy, grey cloud. It is – best damn tobacco Gene’s ever had.

The hardest part about being medic, and the second of two things they warn you when you’re training, is that you won’t be able to save everyone. In the middle of a war, there’s going to be more than one person screaming medic, and there’s only going to be one medic. If you think you can get there in time, you do. But sometimes, you have to make a choice.

Gene hates moments where he has to make a choice, because he never really knows which is the right choice.

There are no casualties in Nuenen, and Gene counts that as a pretty good fight. Even if he has to listen to Liebgott bitch about Winters making him empty his clip while Gene fixes his sliced arm.

Bastogne is cold, but the blood on his hands is hot and red and burning.
He’s running out of morphine, his plasma is freezing, there are no bandages, and there are no scissors. “We’re runnin’ real low, Captain, suh.” He says to Winters one evening, his hands shaking in his pockets and his nose bright pink. “We keep goin’ like this and I won’t be able to do much fo’ the men.” He doesn’t say it to get sympathy – he says it as brutal honesty.

“I know, Doc.” Winters mutters, breath crystalizing into a white cloud before him. “We’re just going to have to make do with what we’ve got. Everyone’s spread thin.” Gene feels like screaming, feels like ripping his hair out. How am I supposed to save anybody? He wants to demand, but keeps his mouth shut, nods his head, and walks away.

They take fire not long after that and lose Julian, a replacement in Heffron’s foxhole. Gene imagines it, a kid no older than 19, blood pouring out of his neck as the Krauts scramble out of their holes and strip him clean.

Heffron is in Gene’s foxhole that night when he gets back, curled up into Spina with a blanket draped over the both of them. “I promised him,” Heffron gasps. “Promised him if anything ever happened I’d get his stuff and send it to his ma. Now the fuckin’ Krauts’ll strip him.”

Gene wants to reach out, smooth out the lines on Heffron’s forehead. He doesn’t know why, but he trusts Heffron. Likes him, even. Which is dangerous, because one day he’ll be lying on the snow before Gene and Gene won’t know what to do.

Maybe it’s the sound of Gene’s voice or the warmth of his hand, but Heffron falls asleep with his head on Gene’s shoulder, his chest rising and falling rhythmically. Spina asks about traiteurs, asks about the healing hands they’re rumored to possess. Gene wants to tell him, my grandma’s hands could save a dead man’s life. She could have cured every disease just by placing her hands on someone’s cheeks. Sometimes she’d smile and I would swear she was an angel.

His grandma tried to teach him her tricks when he was little, tried to teach him how to use the gift that he had been given. His father would come home with alcohol-stained breath and snarl, “arrêter d’enseigner mon fils poubelle, vieux fou.” Stop teaching my son trash, you old fool.

Renee has hands like Gene’s grandmother – gentle, soft, could cure illness and disease with one touch. He feels himself getting attached to her, feels himself getting attached to her smile and her chocolat and her eyes the color of the Bastogne sky on a clear day.

Bombs start going off one night, and Gene can’t find it in himself to get up. Someone’s shouting for a medic, someone’s screaming into the night, trees are exploding and the sky is the color of dirty snow. “Gene, Gene, you gotta get up!” Heffron’s yelling, tugging on the medic’s sleeve and trying to pry him out of his hole.

Gene wants to say no, wants to tell Heffron to go away, because out there is another man that he can’t save and another life that will be lost to the forests of Bastogne. But he gets up because he has to, runs through the warzone and sees Welsh on the ground, Captain Nixon and Winters crowding around him.

And, for the first time in this war, Gene freezes.

*Detachment is key*, the medic trainers would say back in Currahee. *They are men, yes. They are your comrades, yes. But you are the medic and you get attached and you will not let them die. Some men you cannot save, but if you get attached you will not see through that.*

Gene likes Welsh, likes how he’s kind and has faith that they’re going to make it out of the frozen hell of the French forest. Gene spreads sulfa on the wound and prays, lips moving silently as Nixon
tries to hush Welsh. As Harry’s carted off to the Jeep, Gene’s hands shake. He doesn’t even hear Winters tell him to get a hot meal, but he stands and does as he’s told.

The hospital is ashes in his hands, and the blue bandage flutters in the wind like a flag.

He uses the bandana to patch up Heffron’s hand, uses it to fix the wound that he created, and pretends that the sound of the fabric shredding doesn’t mimic a bullet, loud and clear. But it’s easier than he thought, letting go of Renee.

Heffron slides into Gene’s foxhole one night while Spina’s back in the rubble of Bastogne, and he presses an icy hand to Gene’s cheek. “You alright, Doc?” He murmurs, and Gene almost falters because – because the last time he was asked that was by a girl who became nothing more than a faded memory. Heffron’s staring at him with eyes like hope, fingers trembling against Gene’s cheek.

Gene knows this, this feeling in the pit of his stomach. He felt it once or twice when he attended school, with the pretty girls whose eyes were bright and their smiles as light as air. And Heffron’s looking at Gene like he’s the last breath of fresh air, like he’s all that’s keeping him above ground. And so Gene does the first thing that he thinks of.

He leans over and kisses Heffron with all he’s got. And he doesn’t care that this is a sin, says so in the Bible. Doesn’t care that Heffron is kissing him back, because it’s been months – no, years – since he’s been touched like this, kissed like this. Like he’s all that matters.

“Gene.” Babe gasps into his mouth, hands in his hair, and it sounds pleading and desperate and it should sound wrong. But it doesn’t. In a world made of ice and fire and blood, Babe tastes like a miracle. Tastes like summer, tastes like freedom.

Babe untangles his hands from Gene’s hair and pushes on Gene’s shoulders until they’re lying with Babe on top, pressing a burning trail down Gene’s neck. “This – this is wrong.” Gene breathes, and it is. He’s a Catholic boy raised in the south, the Bible says homosexuality is a sin, and he’s been taught to believe that.

“So tell me to stop,” Babe whispers against his mouth. Gene doesn’t.

The war is ending, and the Germans know it – their defenses are crumbling and so are their men. But that doesn’t mean that they’re not going to give the few months they have left in combat a good old college try. So they bomb the Ardennes with everything they’ve got, with malicious integrity and with anger and hatred.

Guarnere and Toye get a leg blown each. Penkala and Muck are nothing more than ashes and jump wings. Compton can’t find it in himself to do anything other than whisper, “medic-medic-medic-medic” like a broken toy, round and round he goes.

They’re all little tin soldiers, broken and beaten and snapped clean in two. And they’re all losing their minds.

That night in the church, for the first time in too long, Gene kneels at the altar and prays. He whispers prayers, first in English, and when those dry up, he says them in French too, the Cajun words thick and heavy on his tongue. His prayers are soft and kind – he prays for Penkala and Muck, for Guarnere and Toye, for Hoobler and for all the men he couldn’t save.

“Can’t believe you’re still talkin’ to him.” A voice behind him says, and Gene turns to see Captain Nixon leaning on a deserted pew – it’s late, most of the company already in bed. “After everything we’ve been through.”
Gene turns back to his folded hands, to the burn on his knees. “He’s God, suh.” He replies. “Always got to talk to ‘im. He’s always listenin’.”

Nixon kind of laughs and advances to the altar, staring up at the carving of Christ and the Cross nailed to the wall. “Yeah.” He breathes, eyes wide and attentive but his hands trembling with alcohol running through his veins. “Always listening, always seeing.” He sighs and glances down at Roe. “Never helping.”

That night, Gene slides into bed beside Babe and curls against the other man’s back. Heffron is sleeping, but moves over subconsciously to give Gene enough room. “I wanna believe,” Gene presses his lips against Babe’s back, voice just above silence. “That there’s someone out there. But I don’t think there is – not anymore. Maybe not ever.” The words taste like metal coming out of his mouth, and he hates himself for saying that.

His grandma, when he was little, would take him to church everyday. They would walk into town and spend an hour in their church, knelt in the pews or at the altar, confessing sins and talking to the one constant in their life. Gene was raised on God, and when he shipped off to war, his grandmother pressed her rosary beads into his hands and whispered, “He is with you, cher. He will always be with you.”

And it’s easy to think like that in Louisiana. It’s easy to think that when you’re safe. But Europe is not safe. Easy Company is not safe. And God might not be there – he might be too busy looking for ghosts of men, broken bodies and broken souls and men who sleep in their own houses but are still on the battlefields with their fallen friends next to them.

In Hagenau, Gene makes it a priority to go around at night and check on the men. Winters tells him it’s not necessary, and maybe it isn’t, but it lets him sleep better at night knowing the men he’s supposed to look after are safe. He finds Malarkey awake one night, eyes blank and unfocused, hands shaky from gripping his rifle so tight.

“Gotta-gotta protect them, Doc.” Malarkey murmurs, but he doesn’t take his eyes off the skyline. He’s rigid and still, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he speaks.

“No one to protect, Malarkey.” Gene whispers, gently pulling the rifle out of the sergeant’s hands. “E’ryone’s safe, I swear it.” Slowly, Gene manages to coax Malarkey into bed. He places the rifle next to the bunk and stays until Malarkey falls asleep. And then, because he’s exhausted and the sound of the men breathing in deeply and out slowly is hypnotizing and rhythmic, he curls up at the foot of Babe’s bed and falls asleep.

The next night, a patrol is planned. It could be a complete success, or Gene could have the blood of fifteen more men on his hands, Babe included.

At about 2am, when Gene and Spina are sitting stiff watching the line, Martin comes tearing into the room and says, “Doc – now – wounded – hurry.” Gene doesn’t get a name, but he grabs his bag and follows Johnny to the basement. Eugene Jackson lies on a table, covered in blood with half his face shot to shit.

Jackson dies choking on his own blood in a basement in Hagenau, at 22 years old.

Gene glances up when he feels no pulse and sees Babe hovering above him, tears sparkling in his eyes. For one moment, just one, Gene allows himself a small sigh of relief that it wasn’t Babe, that he didn’t lose Babe.

The men clear out no long after, patting Gene on the back and shaking hands. Soon, it’s only Gene
and Babe left. The ghost of Jackson hovers somewhere around the outskirts.

“Died from his own grenade.” Babe finally whispers. They’re on opposite sides of the room, distance far and clean between them. And then Babe looks up, something broken in his gaze. “Shoulda been me.”


Babe lets out a choked sob and drops his forehead against Gene’s, grasping onto the medic’s collar. “Just a fucking kid.” He gasps, tears coming hot and fast now. “Got a girl back home, got somebody who’s gonna get that damn telegram, and I’m gonna spend the rest of my life knowin’ that I took that kid from his ma.” Gene pulls Babe close and lets him cry. When the sobs quiet into hiccups and Babe’s not shaking so much, Gene pulls away and brushes at Babe’s tears.

“You listen to me, Heffron.” He murmurs fiercely. “He got a ma, and so do you. This ain’t about just you anymore. Hasn’t been about you since the mo’ you got ya jumpwings. You got brothers, Edward.” Gene kisses him once, chastely, softly, and then whispers against his lips, “Ya got me.” He likes to think that it’s enough.

Gene wakes that night gasping for air, the dream of Heffron splayed out on the table, his face bubbled and burnt, seared into his brain. Babe curls around him and holds him until he stops crying.

The men in the work camp are walking skeletons. Each sigh out of their mouths is a whisper of a Nazi, of their families, of themselves. They are not men here – they are numbers and workers and enemies.

The Nazis have turned these men into ghosts.

O’Keefe, a replacement who shipped in from Maryland, is sitting with his head between his knees and his chest rising and falling raggedly. Captain Nixon can’t look any of these men in the eye, Speirs has a hand wrapped around his gun and another wrapped around a man’s arm, helping the prisoner to sit. Heffron is kneeling next to a pile of bodies, and though Gene can’t hear him, he knows Babe is whispering prayers.

Gene worries about feeding them too much, about giving them too much water. These men have been starved to the brink of death – you overfeed them and they die. But he can’t explain that yet, won’t explain that yet.

An old man with wrinkled skin and trembling hands comes stumbling up to Gene and presses a hand to his cheek. “You…are medic.” The man says in broken English, his German accent thick and clean. He taps the armband, maps out the Red Cross like it’s the only thing of familiarity to him, like it’s all that’s keeping him here. And then he clutches Gene’s hands tightly against his chest. “Sie sind ein Heiler,” he whispers. “Sie sind ein Heiler.”

Gene has never taken a foreign language, never got the chance in high school, but he doesn’t need Web’s translation to know what that means. Sie sind ein Heiler. You are a healer. And Gene wants to believe that, he really does.

But the blood on his hands from all the men he couldn’t save speaks differently.

The war is over, but there are still men that Gene cannot save. Janovec was dead before the car crashed. “He was ten points away.” Webster murmurs, watching as some men lift Janovec into the
ambulance. “Ten points away from going home.” Ten, Gene thinks. _He was ten points away, but there is no home anymore. All there is is war._

That night, Speirs hauls Gene out of bed and takes him to Sergeant Grant, who’s bleeding crimson onto the metal table, whose bullet wound is bright and red. “He’s not going to make it.” The British doctor says. “Not unless you get him to a brain surgeon.” On the way to the Kraut surgeon’s house, Gene whispers every prayer he knows with his hand held above Grant’s heart.

Grant lives. Gene puts the replacement in a corner when he’s brought to the med station and hates himself for hating the I Company man, for hating what war made the kid. He’s no older than 19.

The war ends, and Gene wakes every night curled around Babe, images of Guarnere and Toye and Hoob and all the men he couldn’t save imprinted in his brain.

(Those men will stay with him until he dies – but Heffron will too, and that makes it a little easier to bear.)

The men are shipped home not long after that, and on the train in New York Station just before he boards the train, Babe grabs Gene’s hand. “Come to Philadelphia with me.” He pleads, intertwining their hands. “Come _home_ with me.”

Gene kind of pulls away, kind of forgets that this is the 40s, that what they did during the war was a sin. That how he _feels_ is a sin. “Babe…” He murmurs, hating the way his voice breaks, hating the look in Babe’s eyes. Like Gene has already said no.

“Please.” Babe begs. “I’ve lost so many people in this war. I don’t think-.” He lets out a choked sob, gaze flickering downward. And then he looks up to Gene, presses a hand to his cheek. “I can’t lose you too.” It’s the closest he’s got to love; closest he’s got to telling Gene how he feels. And it’s that, more than anything, that convinces Gene.


The streets of South Philadelphia are nothing like the back roads of Louisiana. For Gene, Philadelphia is sprawling streets and cobblestone pathways. For Babe, Philadelphia is a bitter memory of home, a whispering thought of who he was when he left, and who he is when he comes back.

Gene writes his grandmother, tells her he’s safe up north, tells her he’ll come home soon, he promises. She writes back and tells him that she loves him, that she’ll see him when he’s ready. When he’s ready to let go of what he saw in the war, when he’s ready to be healed.

Babe’s mama gets Gene a bed in Babe’s room, sews him clothes, treats him like one of her own. She feeds him and asks him about Louisiana, about growing up on the Bayou Chene, about the life he lived before the war. But she never asks about the years where he had no home, where he watched countless men die beneath his fingertips. She never asks about the men who never came home, about the blood on Gene’s hands, even though he knows she sees it.

She never asks about Gene’s inability to sleep more than four hours at night, before he’s woken by bloodstained nightmares.

The ghosts of the men he lost climb into bed with him at night, curl around him like shells, whisper _youcouldhavesavedus_ into his skin. He prays to a god that isn’t there, whispers old French words into the darkness. They’re bitter on his tongue – they taste of Bastogne, of snow and blood and death.
He stops saying French prayers after that, stops torturing himself with words that don’t mean jack.

He’s up in his and Babe’s room one day, reading an old book while Babe’s out with his brothers, when he hears Babe’s mother call up the stairs. “Gene!” She calls. “Someone’s hear to see you, love!”

He’s halfway down the stairs when he sees Bill Guarnere, who’s supporting himself on crutches, placing all his weight on the one leg he has. He’s got his uniform on, his jump wings pinned to his lapel. Besides the leg, he looks almost identical to the first time Gene patched him up in Toccoa.

“Hey doc.” Guarnere grins toothily, his eyes beady and smart in the dim lighting of the Heffron kitchen.

Gene makes it to the bottom of the steps, his eyes wide as he stares at the man in front of him. And then he says the first thing that comes to mind. “Still pissin’ needles, Guarnere?” Bill busts up laughing, and for a moment, it’s like there isn’t a gaping hole left by war between them.

Guarnere tells Gene about Joe Toye, who’s living in Reading, PA. He tells him about David Webster, who’s finishing up his literature degree at Harvard. He tells him about Major Winters and Captain Nixon and Lieutenant Welsh, who’s in the middle of planning in his wedding. In turn, Gene tells Bill about Buck Compton, Donald Malarkey, Skinny Sisk, Shifty Powers. All the men who came home, all the men they’ve heard from.

The ghosts of the men that Gene couldn’t save hang heavy between them, but neither bring them up.

He almost tells Bill about Babe, about how he thinks he might be in love with him, but for some reason the words don’t want to spill out. But Bill looks at him like he understands, and that’s more than enough.

That next night, Gene slips out of the room to the porch, where he pulls out a pack of Lucky Strikes and holds them in his hands. He can’t quite bring himself to light them – not yet, not now. He hasn’t smoked since the end of the war, since he doesn’t need the bite of a cigarette to warm him up.

After a while, the porch door opens and Babe sits down beside Gene, wrapping one of his ma’s blankets around their shoulders. He huddles close to Gene, even though it’s not that cold in Philadelphia. For a moment, both men are thinking about nights in foxholes, where all they had to keep warm was the man beside them.

Gene remembers nights when he would dig himself a single-man foxhole, despite hours of running around telling men to do the exact opposite. War doesn’t even feel real anymore – it feels like a distant memory, like he’s watching something at the pictures.

“You written to ya grandma?” Babe asks, the blanket moving slightly as he shifts closer to Gene.

Gene breathes out slowly. “Not since I moved in.” He replies with a voice that’s just shy of a whisper. The cardboard box of the cigarettes cuts into his palm. He knows Babe still smokes, and Guarnere, when he visited, carried the smell of nicotine with him like a black cloud. But whenever Gene inhales the smoke, all he sees are the forests of Bastogne and the basement in Hagenau and the skeletons of men who were once whole before the Nazis tore them to pieces.

Silence descends like a storm cloud. Gene can feel Heffron breathing beside him, slow and constant and steady. He can smell the gasoline and oil from the South Philly streets. Can feel, like a constant reminder, the jump wings still pinned to Heffron’s shirt. He wears them like a badge of honor.

Gene’s jump wings are hidden in a box in a room with the remainder of Renee’s scarf, because he
can’t bear to get rid of them, but the ghosts they carry are too strong.

“What are we doin’, Babe?” Gene finally asks, and Babe’s breath hitches. Whether it’s because he called him Babe, Gene doesn’t know. He doesn’t care.

“Whataya mean?” The other man questions.

Gene huffs out a laugh and turns the cigarette package over in his hands. “This.” He waves to them. “Us.” He laughs again, but the sound is devoid of humor. It’s tired, broken. Meaningless. “Livin’ at ya ma’s house, no job and nothin’ else down the end a’ this road. I ain’t sleepin’ more than two hours a night, ya ma’s walkin’ on eggshells ‘round us.” He turns to Babe, his eyes broken and his lips upturned in a smile that doesn’t really mean much. “What are we doin’? ‘Cause this sure as hell ain’t livin’.”

Babe stares at him for a moment that seems to stretch into forever, and there’s something calm yet curious in his gaze. And then, almost in slow motion, he reaches out and kisses Gene – sweet and slow and gentle, but it tastes like cigarette smoke and chocolate and the cold winter of the Ardennes.

“We’re doin’ the best we can, Gene.” He murmurs against the other man’s mouth, his breath warm and his hands soft and reassuring pressed into Gene’s thighs. “War ain’t supposed to be easy ta get outta. But, you know what counts?” He kisses the corner of Gene’s mouth as he talks. “That we’re tryin’. ‘Cause I know a lotta men who’d’a given up by now. Men who have given up by now.”

Joe Liebgott cut contact the moment his feet touched the familiar ground of San Francisco. David Webster’s ghosts are written in a book that will never be published. Captain Nixon will drown himself in Vat 69 and will pretend like he is not broken. Donald Malarkey returned to Oregon knowing that his two best friends never got to marry the girls of their dreams, and his other best friend will never be able to live past the images of Bill Guarnere and Joe Toye, their bodies bleeding thick and red over the snow.

This is what war does to men – this is all it’s ever done to them. It shatters them, and there is no way around this. It is a fact of life. It is a fact of war.

“I love you, Edward.” Gene sighs before he can stop himself.

Babe stills, a moment of silence passes between them. And then he smiles and whispers, just as quietly but as honestly, “I love you too, Eugene.”

And it’s not much, nothing more than words whispered into the dark of night in the middle of South Philly, the memory of war still hanging heavy on their shoulders. But it’s enough, and it counts. And, for the first time in a long time, it’s something for both of them to hold onto. It’s something real, something tangible.

Gene grins and kisses Babe again, and his heart skips a beat when Babe kisses him back with just as much fever.

This, he thinks to himself, this is what living is.

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