A Christmas Carol

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Summary

Based on Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol". Lipton tells their daughter how Speirs learned to love Christmas.

Disclaimer: all characters are fictional. I used the timeline creatively--I know they were not yet holding the line at Foy or sleeping at the convent in Rachamps at Christmas. All errors in the timeline of Band of Brothers, descriptions of military customs, strategies and courses of action are mine. This is NOT an accurate portrayal of Easy Company's part in the Battle of the Bulge, and is not intended to be.
I know you said no death, but somehow I can't write Band of Brothers fic without death. It's not what you think! I hope you still enjoy it.

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What Carwood had been looking forward to the most when he and Ron decided to adopt a child was Christmas Eve. He remembered how every year on Christmas Eve, just before he put them to bed, his father would gather him and his brothers and sisters around him, take out his big book of fairy tales, and read to them. He could still recall the sweet smell of the pine tree in the corner, which they used to hack down in the woods--his two brothers on the lookout for the forest ranger, and him working the saw until he felt beads of sweat rolling down his back under his thick winter clothes-- and the vapours of the turkey roasting in the oven drifting in from the kitchen, betraying his parents' efforts to save up for a meal that was a little bit more special than usual.

Carwood thought back on his childhood with fondness. He had been given to reminiscing about his youth ever since he and Ron had moved to Virginia after the war and he had first
admitted to Ron that yes, he would indeed like to raise children with him. He didn't think Ron had been strictly opposed to the idea, though even after living with him for five years he still didn't feel like he could penetrate Ron's defense mechanisms—layers of sarcasm and aloofness that had helped him survive the war—well enough to know if he was being sincere or not. He simply took Ron's distant "hmm" as he hid behind his newspaper as a cue to start looking for adoption agencies. And though Ron never said that he did not want their relationship to go in this direction, and seemed to agree with everything Carwood said and did, he could never shake the feeling that Ron didn't want a child as badly as he did. But then came the day when they rushed into the room where the young mother of their child was resting with her baby, the smallest creature they had ever seen crumpled on her chest. Carwood watched as the doctor passed the little bundle to Ron, who he never thought he'd see handling anything other than a round of ammunition as gently as this. He noticed his widening pupils as he brushed the tiny cheek with his forefinger; the trembling corners of his mouth as the little girl stirred and yawned; his smiling face as he handed her to Carwood and their eyes met, glowing with love for him and her and their life together.

They watched their little girl, whom they named Victoria (born on the anniversary of V-E Day), grow up until she was big enough to run towards the door and clutch Ron's leg when he came home on leave and blow out seven candles on her birthday cake. Carwood read her stories every night, but in the back of his mind he kept the thought of Christmas Eve, and he always bought a special story book just for that occasion.

This year, when David Webster and Joe Liebgott came round for Victoria's birthday, David crouched next to the birthday girl, and said: "This is a very special present for you, Victoria. I first read this when I was as old as you are. It's a little scary, but it's also about Christmas, and about happiness, and about love. I hope you like it." He kissed the top of her head and helped Victoria tear off the golden wrapping paper, with Joe muttering about selecting that paper especially for her and spending fifteen minutes wrapping the present, until David pulled him to his side and kissed the top of his head too, which shut him up. The book was Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol". Victoria looked through the book, her cheeks ruddy with excitement, but being seven years old (after all) she tired of it after a few minutes and left to go jump on the grass to coax the earth worms to the surface, which she then pulled out of their burrows and added to the collection of bugs she kept in a mason jar.

Now it was Christmas Eve, and Carwood pulled his little girl on his lap with one hand, clutching "A Christmas Carol" in the other. He had insisted on a placing a big story-telling chair in the corner of the bedroom next to a standing lamp with a dusty green shade, just like the one his father used to have.

"Are you ready, Vicky?" His daughter nodded, being so enamoured with his story-telling that she ceased her fidgeting and listened.

"Marley was dead, to begin with," he read out loud. "Dead as a door-nail."

They had not raised their daughter to be afraid of death. Ron would often pull his daughter on his lap and tell her about daddy's brave friends who had died in the war, and of a fine Sunday they would often take a stroll around the military cemetery, which was a short drive away. Dogs and rabbits that did not live as long as Victoria would have liked did not go to an imaginary farm, but were buried in her presence, and as the grave was dug she watched with a stoicism that made Ron proud. Once she'd brought her recently deceased rabbit to school for a class presentation, something she only told Ron at the breakfast table when Carwood was already gone on an early shift. The flurry of alarmed letters that followed insisted upon seeking help for the child and putting morbid fantasies out of her mind.

"At least you know how the world works, Victoria," Carwood said to his daughter when she came home from school with a tear-streaked face, and he put the lid back on the box to cover up the rabbit's accusatory, glassy stare. "Lots of people don't want to know what death is. They find out the hard way."

"What's a door-nail?" was the inevitable question that followed, and Carwood explained it to
her. He read on until he came to the unfavourable description of the book's protagonist, Ebenezer Scrooge. "Secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster."

"Like daddy," Victoria commented, pointing at the picture of a grave-looking Scrooge dismissing the two men who asked him for a donation to the poor house. Carwood stopped reading. How observant she is! he thought to himself. It must not have escaped Victoria that, though he was a loving husband and father within their four walls, the outside world generally did not have Ron Speirs' sympathies; and he generally spurned any invitations, or requests, or greetings whenever he wasn't in the mood. Carwood worried about him, fearing that he would grow bitter and isolated, and therefore made every effort to drag Ron with him to birthdays, office dinners, and other social occasions. Whenever anyone from Easy Company came over, however--all known to Victoria as Uncle Bill, Uncle Malarkey, Uncle Dick and Uncle Lew, and so on--every trace of anxiety seemed to evaporate from Ron's face. Carwood thought for a moment, and then said: "Yeah, just like daddy. Do you want me to tell you a story about daddy?"

"Yeah!" Victoria said, with the enthusiasm she normally only reserved for the discovery of a new species of beetle to add to her jar.

"Well then." Carwood thought for a moment, then closed the book with his hand between the pages, ready to open it when his memory of the storyline failed him. "Private Hoobler was dead, to begin with." Victoria nodded; she'd heard of Hoobler before, of course.

"Hoobler had died from a loaded Luger that went off in his pocket. Hoobler was the most cheerful, joking fella you ever saw. He was always the first to volunteer for a patrol, and everyone in Easy Company liked him. But Lieutenant Ron Speirs had not known him well, nor did he care to. He thought Hoobler's death was a waste of a good soldier, and a bad example of how to handle your weapon. Just like you shouldn't run with scissors," he admonished Victoria, who groaned and said, "I wasn't running! Just tell the story, dad."

"Speirs marched along the line, his face set hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The soldiers told each other stories about his ruthlessness; that was fine by him. They tried to guess whether he had done this or that; he let them guess. External heat and cold had little influence on Speirs. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. He was respected, and he did his duty as best he could. That was all." Carwood was beginning to enjoy himself, as memories of meeting Ron in the Bois Jacques for the first time came flooding back to him. He bobbed his daughter on his knee.

"Are you still awake?"
"Yes, dad."
"Okay then. I'll go on.

One evening, at a quarter past seven on December 24th to be precise, Speirs sat in his private tent writing a report. It was chilly, bleak, biting weather; the fog was draped low between the trees, and outside the tent he could hear men go wheezing up and down, beating their hands upon their breasts, and stamping their boots to warm their feet.

A scuffle at the tent flap. First Sergeant Lipton stepped in and asked Lieutenant Speirs to join them for Christmas chow, which consisted of boiled turkey and mashed potatoes warmed over an open fire. But Speirs scoffed: 'Christmas, Sergeant Lipton? If the men were dreaming of a white Christmas, congratulations! They got it. I suppose they'll take the German flares as Christmas lights. Artillery as New Year's fireworks next. And do you think the Germans will let us have our little Christmas party, fires and tinsel and all, and lay off shelling for the night? If we got a fire, they'll know exactly where we are.'"

With a smile, Carwood added: "'Bah, humbug!'"

"And First Sergeant Lipton said: 'Well, we'll keep yours, sir, in case you want some anyway.' Because he knew Lieutenant Speirs wasn't the sort of person to give his chow to someone else, even at Christmas. And he was right. Speirs followed him to the chow line, and there he found all the men huddled around the fire, eating their turkey and mashed potatoes. Major Winters gave him some food, too, and all together they listened to a German soldier, who was far away in his
foxhole, singing "Silent night", just like we do in church." Carwood paused, thinking back to that melodious voice drifting across the frosted clearing, and felt a lump in his throat, just as he had felt then. He recalled that even in the Great War, the men climbed out of their trenches and wished each other a merry Christmas at midnight.

"A poor excuse for a Christmas dinner,' thought Lieutenant Speirs, and in his mind a parade of big turkeys dripping with gravy, bowls of mashed potatoes and peas, and an endless river of mulled wine passed him by. He took a bite. It was stone-cold, of course. In spite of this, he didn't join the men at the fire to heat up his food, but leaned against a tree trunk and listened to them talk about Christmas back home in the States, about parents and puddings and sweethearts and sweetmeats. When he had finished his melancholy meal, Speirs went back to his tent and nearly collided with First Sergeant Lipton, who was balancing several mess kits on top of each other, and explained that he was on his way to bring food to the guys who were watching the line and couldn't join the party.

'Bah, humbug!' Speirs said again, and started to grope his way to his tent through the dark forest. When he had found it and gone inside, he lit his lamp and finished writing his report. Feeling tired, he decided to lay down on his straw mattress and snatch a few hours of sleep.

Before he knew it he had dozed off, forgetting to put out the lamp. Suddenly, he was woken up by a bright light - as bright as the sun! Speirs awoke, startled, and shielded his eyes from the light. It was as if someone had poured kerosene on the lamp. Although he wouldn't admit it to himself, he was really scared. Can you imagine daddy being scared, Victoria?"

"Never!" she said, and grabbed a hanful of his hair.

"Ow--the light became dimmer and dimmer--Victoria, can you let daddy go, please? Thank you--and it shifted and changed shape until, finally, it was shaped like a man. The figure, which was almost transparent, wore a helmet and a uniform, and Speirs could even see the pistol that he carried in his pocket. Searching for a name, he realised with a shock that it was Private Don Hoobler who was standing--or was it floating?--in his tent. Now, I can tell you that he was most definitely scared, though even since his childhood he had never really been scared of anything. But he didn't really believe what he was seeing; even though he looked the phantom up and down as it stood before him; and though he felt the chilling stare of the dead eyes, and saw the helmet with the dangling chin strap, the rifle slung over his shoulder, and the musette bag on his back, he was still incredulous, and fought against his senses.

He said, with a tremble in his voice: 'What is the meaning of this?'

And the ghost replied: 'Evening, Lieutenant Speirs, sir!'
The voice was cheerful, as it had been in life, and Speirs looked around in terror, hoping for somebody to come in and see what all the noise was about. Trying to keep up appearances, he asked coldly, 'Who are you?'

'You mean, who was I?' The spirit took off his helmet, the grin still in place.

'Who were you then?'

'Private Don Hoobler, Easy Company, Second Platoon, sir!' The spirit saluted him.

'Can you sit down?' asked Speirs, because he wasn't sure if ghosts in their transparency could take a chair, and hoped that it would turn out to be a joke or require an embarrassing explanation if he couldn't. But Hoobler sat down at the desk, and looked quite comfortable.

'You don't believe in me, sir,' he observed, and Speirs felt a little gratified that even his hallucinations addressed him as 'sir'.

'I don't,' he returned.

'Why not? Don't you trust your senses?'

Speirs hesitated; he was pretty proud of his senses, though he wouldn't call himself as good as Earl 'One Lung' McClung, who was part Native American, and said he could smell Germans.

'Maybe tonight's turkey was undercooked,' he replied, 'and I'm hallucinating from indigestion. It could happen.' He tried to come up with a logical explanation to distract himself and bottle up his terror; because every time Hoobler spoke, it turned his blood to ice.
Hoobler sighed and crossed his ghostly legs, and stuck his hand in the flickering flame of the lamp, his fingers passing through the fire as if it was air. Speirs stared at the hand and at Hoobler, and now he was sure he was really talking to a ghost.

"Of course," Victoria observed. "Fire can't touch ghosts. Everybody knows that." Carwood looked down at his daughter, bemused, and made a mental note to start keeping track of what she checked out at the library. Downstairs, he heard a door close; Ron was home. He pushed the door closed with his toes, and resumed the story.

"'Why are you here?' Speirs asked.
' I'm here to warn you, sir,' Hoobler said, solemnly, 'that you're gonna die tomorrow.'
'Tomorrow!' Speirs exclaimed. He felt fear grip his heart with an icy hand. It was one thing to make peace with the idea that he was in danger of dying every day. Knowing for sure that there was a bullet out there with his name on it was quite another.
'Yep,' said Hoobler. He was idly picking at the bullet hole in his leg. 'At noon. If you don't change your ways.'
'And what might "my ways" be?' Speirs asked, anger rising in his chest.
'Oh well, you know. Being angry and mean to the men.' At this, Speirs nearly exploded. 'Angry and mean! You mean intimidating and respected, as a good combat leader should be.'
'But mean nonetheless,' said Hoobler. 'Hell, sir, we were all quaking in our boots whenever you walked past. Nobody ever dared to ask you for a cigarette.'
'And how does this make a difference whether I die tomorrow at noon or not, Private?'
'Well, if you keep acting mean, you won't get sent on patrol tomorrow,' explained Hoobler. 'And if you don't go on patrol, you'll get shelled. Don't ask me why--I'm just the messenger. I mean, I shot myself in the leg. That was just plain stupid. And now I'm stuck wandering around here warning others not to do the same thing. So, sir, you got a pretty good shot at not dying tomorrow. All you gotta do is be a little nicer to people. Then you'll live.'

Speirs crossed his arms. 'You're talking nonsense, Private Hoobler. I don't see how it matters. I don't believe in prophecies, especially not from the spirit of indigestion. Humbug!'"

"Carwood?" Ron called upstairs.
"Reading to Victoria," Carwood called back. When he received no reply, he peeked in the book, and went on.

"Hoobler sighed. 'I was afraid you'd say that. You're gonna be haunted by three spirits tonight.'
'More spirits? I'd rather not,' Speirs stammered. Hoobler stood up and shoved one hand in his pocket.
'Afraid so, sir. Hey, I'm just following orders.' He flexed his other hand and ran his fingers through the flame again. He chuckled to himself. 'Tickles. So, you'll get the first at 1 AM, the second at 2 AM, and the third, you guessed it, at 3 AM.'

Speirs gaped at him. 'Can't I just take 'em all at once?'
'Nope,' Hoobler said cheerfully. 'Hey, it wasn't my idea, sir. I ain't cut out for all this moral mumbo jumbo. Just... Please, sir. Be a little nicer. No need to waste lives if it can be helped.'

Hoobler pushed the tent flap aside and peeked into the darkness.
'Hey, maybe I'll go and see how the guys are doing. You think they'd like that?' He looked over his shoulder at Speirs, winked, and vanished.

Well, Victoria, as you may imagine, Ron Speirs was pretty upset by all of this. He laid down again, and he thought over and over again, was it a dream? Because you know, sweetheart, everybody was very tired and very hungry and dreaming of hot food and warm beds all the time. So you can understand why he thought that he'd imagined it. Just like you pretend you're dying," he added with an eyeroll, "when I make you lunch twenty minutes late."

"Speirs looked at his watch. It was one minute before 1 AM. He looked around the tent, looked back to his watch, and around again. Four, three, two. Nothing.
A flash of light! Speirs instinctively covered his eyes with his hands and looked out between his fingers. There was an orb of light in the middle of the tent, just like the first time, but now a man stepped out of it, and it started to fizzle and splutter like a damp candle until only the shimmering outline of the soldier remained. He, too, was wearing his helmet and his rifle, and he looked a little dazed, as if he had just woken up.

'Blithe,' Speirs said, surprised. The soldier looked around, as if he had no idea where he was; then his eyes met Speirs’s, and he smiled dreamily.

'Evening, sir.'

'Are you the spirit whose coming was foretold me?'

"Daddy wouldn't say that," said Victoria.

Carwood laughed, his finger next to the line where he was paraphrasing from the book.

"You're right. He wouldn't.

'Blithe, am I supposed to believe you're now going to teach me to be nice to people?' Speirs folded his arms, glaring at the shimmering, shifting apparition.

'I am,' replied Blithe. He spoke very slowly, with a Southern accent, as if he was in no hurry at all. 'I am the ghost of Christmas past.'

For a moment Speirs entertained the notion of just going back to sleep, but Blithe, as if he had read his thoughts, said: 'Well sir, I'd like to show you some things, if you wouldn't mind. It's for your own welfare.' He put out his hand. Speirs scoffed, and muttered that his idea of welfare including a decent night's sleep.

'Your salvation, then, sir. Come on, let's take a walk.' He held out his hand, insistently, and Speirs, despite his better intentions, took it. As soon as he touched Blithe's hand, the tent around them vanished, and they were rushing through a tunnel which grew lighter and lighter. Suddenly, Speirs felt ground under his feet again, and he swayed on the spot where he landed. He felt a warm rush on his cheek, and inhaled the smell of food. He blinked, and looked around him. He recognized the furniture, the curtains, and the distant sound of voices as belonging to his parents' dining room.

'Do you know this room, sir?' Blithe's voice said behind him.

'Yes,' Ron said, softly. He looked around in wonder until his eye fell upon a little dark-haired boy, who was sitting at the table, pushing his food around with his fork on the plate before him. The table was set, and the centerpiece was a large Sunday roast, which had one chunk carved out of the side, and the fork and knife still sticking out at the top. Spread around the roast were a casserole, a bowl of yams, and a plate full of greens, all missing one spoonful. Speirs looked at the little boy who was eating his dinner by himself, and hunched over his plate and dwarfed by the gigantic table, made him remember the sting of sadness he had felt at yet another Christmas Eve interrupted by his parents fighting before they had even taken their first bite. He felt then, and he felt now, that they didn't care about him one bit--not even at Christmas. Speirs glanced at Blithe, who was looking at the ceiling as if it presented a fascinating mosaic to him.

He swallowed, recollecting himself, and said sternly, 'Can we go, Private?'

'If you wish, sir,' drawled Blithe. He stepped forward.

'But remember: these are the ghosts of the past. That they are what they are, do not blame me.' Before Speirs could respond, Blithe touched his hand again. They were whisked off, flying through the tunnel with a sound like running water, and before Speirs knew it, their feet touched down upon a wooden floor. The air around them was filled with laughter, the clinking of glasses, and the warm sound of a horn section puffing out 'Jingle Bells'. It was the annual US Army officers' Christmas party, and Speirs, who by now knew what to look for, immediately sought himself out. There he was, in a corner, glancing around the room helplessly while the slightly tipsy wife of some captain loomed over him. Speirs smiled in spite of himself; he remembered this moment well. The young Speirs in the corner locked eyes with somebody across the room, and the real Speirs turned around to see the blond, blue-eyed man in uniform, who had positioned
himself in the opposite corner, and who now raised his champagne glass to Speirs with a wink and a smile. Speirs excused himself to the woman, diving under the arm with which she was leaning against the wall and blocking his exit, and headed for the bar. Armed with a new glass of champagne, he looked at the corner where the blond man had been standing, but found it empty. A look of dread passed over his face until he felt a tap on his shoulder, and turned around to come face to face with his admirer.

The man raised his glass and touched it to Speirs's with a bright ping, and said, 'Merry Christmas.'

Speirs watched them, mesmerized; he remembered the face with the slightly drooping lower lip, the wide eyes, and the carefully pommed hair as if he'd seen it only yesterday. He felt Blithe's hand on his shoulder, and shrugged it off; he wanted to stay, to see the electrifying looks his younger self exchanged with the other man.

'I think you remember another Christmas with this man, sir.' Blithe's voice was almost a whisper, but insistent nonetheless.

'Oh,' said Speirs, and his cheeks flamed with embarrassment. 'You don't have to show me that one.' But he felt the floor give way beneath his feet, and again rushed forward in time and space, the touch of Blithe's fingers the only thing that kept him on course.

This time, they were outside. The sun had just disappeared behind a hill, and the snow-covered landscape and frozen pond glowed a soft pink in the dying light. There were two men sitting on a bench next to the pond, holding hands. Speirs stepped around them to see their faces.

'I just don't understand why you wanna join the paratroopers, Ron,' the blond man sighed. 'You could have had it easy and taken a desk job, like me. Are you really that desperate to put your life on the line?'

In his own eyes Speirs could already see the dangerous twinkle that would push him out of the door of an airplane and behind German lines two years later.

'Yeah, George, I have to. We have a duty to this country, and I don't wanna push pencils to do it. Why can't you understand it? Look-' he put his other hand over George's, 'just because my ideas of the future have changed doesn't mean I've changed towards you!'

'Our contract is an old one,' George sighed. 'It was made when we were both young, and foolish, and content to be so. Now you wanna go out and get yourself killed. And for what? You are changed. When it was made, you were another man.'

'I was a boy,' Speirs said, impatiently. 'Your own feeling tells you that you were not then what you are now. But I am still the same. I've thought about it a lot, and I've made my peace with it.'

'Have I ever betrayed you?'

'No, you haven't. But your nature has changed. If my love was ever worth anything to you, it has lost its value. If you were free to choose anyone, anytime, I know you'd never go for the likes of me. I know you think I only became an officer because of my father's money, and that I'm a coward for wanting to see out the war behind a desk. I know it, and I release you; with a full heart, for the love of him you once were.' When Ron was about to speak, George went on: 'I hope you'll feel sorry about what you left behind. For a while, at least. Then, when you're shooting at Germans, you'll only think of it as a dream, from which you'll be happy to have awakened. I hope you're happy in the life you've chosen.' He left him, and they parted.

'Blithe,' said Speirs, with tears in his eyes, 'show me no more. Take me back.'

'I've got one more for you, sir,' Blithe's ghost said, and the scene changed again. They were in a room that was alive with the light of a blazing fire and the sound of children, laughing and chasing each other around the room. Speirs looked about him and saw George, sitting by the fire, with a little boy upon his knee. The door opened, and another man, who was carrying some large packages, entered and kicked it shut with his heel. The children descended upon him, and he set down the packages on the table and walked over to George, who was waiting for him with a delighted smile.

'Merry Christmas,' they said to each other, and kissed, while in the background the children squealed with delight as they tore open the packages. Speirs looked on attentively as they caressed
and kissed the little boy on George's knee, and when he thought that such a little creature, as beautiful and as full of promise, might have called him father, his sight grew very dim indeed."

Carwood shook Victoria softly. "Are you still listening, sweetie?"
"Yes," said Victoria, but she said it softly. "Is daddy gonna be okay?"
"Daddy is gonna be okay," Carwood said, and kissed the top of her head. "You'll see."

"And Blithe said to him, 'Do you remember, sir, when you told me the only way to fight the war was to remember that you were already dead?' And Speirs replied, with a lump in his throat: 'You know, Blithe, you're right. I think a part of me was already dead.' The scene faded, and Speirs blinked, finding himself back in his tent on his straw mattress.

He looked at his watch. One minute to 2 AM. He rubbed his eyes until he saw stars, and waited for the burst of light to fill the tent. When it didn't come, he looked at his watch again.

'A quarter past 2!' he said in wonder. 'I wonder if--'

The moment he sat up, the tent flap opened, and in walked Skip Muck and Alex Penkala, both gnawing on an enormous turkey leg and taking swigs from a bottle of wine in between bites.

'Evening, sir!' they chorused. They looked at each other and burst into laughter over an old joke that was evidently between them. Speirs looked from one to the other, open-mouthed. At first glance, they looked solid, their cheeks ruddy and their faces smiling; but the longer he looked at them, he could see their transparent bodies consisted of a billion tiny pieces, glued together as it were, almost not visible to the eye.

'Well sir, I think this is the first time I've seen you lost for words,' Skip Muck chuckled. 'Don't worry. We're only the spirits of Christmas present.'

'I just--' He paused, and looked at the two men, chewing their turkey, their eyes bright with an untold joke.

'It's good to see you again, boys,' he said, and he meant it, too. He stood up from his bed, and looked into Muck and Penkala's surprised faces.

'Take me wherever you have to, men. I was just taken by force, and I saw things that taught me a lesson. If you have anything to teach me, let me profit by it.'

Muck and Penkala looked at each other.

'That was easy,' said Penkala. 'Here, sir, touch my arm. Some turkey for you, sir?'

As he wiggled the gnawed bone in front of Speirs' face, they were sucked into the tunnel and dropped off in a dark forest. Speirs looked around him, and saw Muck and Penkala already walking towards an orange glow between the trees. He followed them, and entered the very same clearing where he had taken his dinner. The men were singing "Lili Marleen", the fire had been poked up high, and there was such an atmosphere of merriness and jocularity that Speirs felt his spirits being lifted just by witnessing it. The murmurs of the men, the smiles even on the faces of the officers, made it seem, at least for the moment, as if their bellies were full, their hearts were full, and the Germans were on a different planet.

'Private Muck,' he said, with an interest he had never felt before, 'tell me that the Germans won't shell them tonight.'

'Do you think the Germans will let them have their little Christmas party, fires and tinsel and all, and lay off shelling for the night? They know exactly where they are.'

Speirs hung his head to hear his own words quoted by Muck's ghost. When he looked up again, he found that Muck and Penkala had joined their friends on the edge of the fire pit. Though they must have been invisible to the men, he saw Malarkey look up and over his shoulder, frowning as if he had felt something touch him, and then turn back to the fire with a shrug. Speirs wandered among the groups of men, unable to stop himself smiling at the hearty, cheerful faces around him. Suddenly, he heard his name.

He whirled around, and saw Frank Perconte stand up with his cup raised.

'I give you Lieutenant Speirs, who ain't here tonight, and us being the happier for it!' There was some scattered laughter, and Speirs' smile drained from his face.
'Now I want you to give me your best Speirs stories, and I'll tell you if they're true or not. And not the one about the German prisoners, because I heard that one a million times already.'

'I heard he wandered into German lines, asked for a cigarette, got one, and made it back unharmed,' someone called out.

'Ah! Now that I know for a fact is true. Though to be fair, we had those Krauts surrounded and they'd already surrendered, so it wasn't really their line any more. Okay, okay. Over there.'

'I heard he was raised by wolves.'

'That…seems inaccurate. Have you ever seen him eat raw meat? I didn't think so. Malark?'

'I heard he gets first crack at the food droppings and hoards our rations cuz he thinks hunger makes us fight better.'

'Hey, I heard that one too.'

'Yeah, you heard it from me, dummy.'

'I definitely seen him run off with a stack of K-rations some time.'

'Okay, if Shifty's seen him, then we'll say that it's true. I dunno where he got that idea. Anyone else?'

'I heard he's a secret experiment of the government to create a supersoldier. They removed his heart, so he doesn't show any emotions. He's just a killing machine.'

'Jesus Christ, what is this, the Wizard of Oz? As believable as that may seem, I don't think that…'

Speirs had imperceptibly become so light of heart when he first stood among them that he would have raised his glass with a speech for them in return, if they had been able to hear his voice. Now, though, the sound of laughter seemed like breaking glass to his ears, and he turned away from the company, and saw Muck and Penkala standing behind him, laughing heartily at Perconte's latest claim.

'Let's go, sir,' Penkala said, still giggling, and held out his hand. Speirs took it, feeling like his heart was sinking in his shoes. They rushed through the darkness and found themselves in the company headquarters tent, where Lipton and Welsh were playing at cards, while Winters and Nixon looked on. Nixon, who was obviously high on Christmas spirit, was pouring a round of liquor for the other officers (excepting Winters, who was drinking coffee).

'Thanks, Nix,' Welsh said with a grin, 'but I was really feeling more like having some…gin!' He spread his hand out on the table and stretched his arms above his head with a great 'Whoop!', basking in his victory.

'Well done, sir,' Lipton said with a smile as he gathered up the cards.

'Oh, they're playing gin rummy!' Speirs exclaimed. 'Well.' He blew on his fingertips as if to dust them off and rubbed his hands together. 'Let's have another one, boys.'

'How about a round of canasta?' Winters offered. 'I'd like to join.'

'Even better!' said Speirs. He watched as Lipton dealt and the officers began their game. He prowled around and looked over their shoulders, quite forgetting his part in all this, and the fact that his voice wasn't audible to their ears when he said, 'Harry, the 2 is wild!', or guessed Nixon's next move, and was right quite often too; because a recently sharpened bayonet was no sharper than Speirs. Muck and Penkala cheered when he predicted the results correctly, and exclaimed 'Ah, you would've had him, sir', when someone at the table folded. They were very pleased to find him in this mood. When Speirs asked them if he could stay the whole night, however, they shook their heads, and said it couldn't be done.

The officers, having finished their round and their whiskey, started a new game: Yes and No, where three of them had to ask the fourth questions that he could only answer with yes or no, to find out what he was thinking of.

'Onew half hour,' Speirs pleaded with his ghostly guards.

'Only one.' They assented.

The rapid-fire of questions that was aimed at Captain Nixon elicited from him that he was thinking of an animal, rather a disagreeable animal, a savage animal which grunted and growled, and sometimes talked, who came from America, who was bloodthirsty and who liked to steal shiny things, and who didn't live in a herd or a flock, who only came out of his hole to hunt and eat,
who you couldn't find in a circus or at a farm, and who wasn't a magpie or a mountain lion or a cat or a pitbull or a tiger or a bear.

'I know!' cried Harry, and he said: 'It's Ron Speirs!', which it certainly was. And through the ensuing laughter and Winters' remonstrations, Speirs saw Lipton's face fall.

'He's given us plenty of entertainment, and it would be ungrateful not to drink his health,' Nixon said, laughing and raising his glass. 'To Speirs!'

Feeling Muck's hand on his shoulder, Speirs turned round, and stammered: 'I never knew they thought I was that savage.'

'I think you mean intimidating and respected, as a good combat leader should be,' Penkala said helpfully.

Muck pointed past him, and said, 'I don't think Lipton shares their opinion, sir.' Speirs looked again at Lipton, who was staring into his glass, and who wasn't laughing along with the others. He saw Winters, who was always observant, looking at Lipton too. The ghostly soldiers were tugging on his arm.

'We have to go now, sir. We only got a couple of minutes left here.'

And they went. Speirs anticipated returning to his tent, but instead he found himself in on a dark, foggy plain. He looked around for Muck and Penkala, but they were gone, and he imagined he still heard their laughter ring, like bells, in the night. Straining his eyes, he could see a weakly luminous figure making its way towards him through the mist. There was no bright light, and a new terror seized Speirs's heart as he saw the slow, dragging gait of the man coming towards him. When they were almost face to face, Speirs recognized him as Private Julian. His uniform was dark and wet with blood, and he could see right through the large hole that a German sniper had torn in his throat.

'Private Julian', Speirs said, trying to keep a tremor out of his voice. 'You're gonna show me the things that have yet to come?'

Julian nodded, his ghostly eyes cold and empty, and beckoned Speirs to follow him. Although well used to his ghostly company by now, Speirs's legs quaked beneath him at the sight of the undead soldier, who had not uttered a word thus far.

'Julian!' he said in a stern voice, attempting to gain back control of his senses.

'I'm willing to follow you because I know it'll do me good. I'm already resolved to be a different man than what I was, and I'm prepared to follow you with a thankful heart, and I-I'm glad to have your company. Won't you say something?'

Julian just looked at him, then beckoned again, and turned around. Speirs hesitated, but followed on his heels. They didn't seem to enter the office; it seemed to spring up around them. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, illuminating the many dust motes that were at play there. In the centre of the room, a large mahogany desk was piled high with cutlery, candlesticks, Swastika flags, books, bottles of liquor, tins of food, and other treasures. Two men entered and paused in the doorway, gaping at the glistening heap.

'Good Lord!' said the first, who Speirs now recognized as the Battalion S-3, 'is this all his?' He whistled, circling the desk. 'He sure took good care of himself.'

'Yep,' returned the other, 'and a fat lot of good it did him, too, lugging it all around Europe. We got orders to divide it all up. I made a list of who gets what. The expensive silver goes to Colonel Sink...'

As the two men conferred, Speirs expressed his surprise in not seeing his likeness anywhere in the room; but as he had resolved upon a change of life, he hoped to see his new-born resolutions already carried out in this fantasy, and his war loot, for it was unquestionably his, divided up between the men. He felt Julian tugging on his hand, and he followed him outside into the light of day. A tremendous explosion shook the ground and made his ears ring; he instinctively dove for cover, pressing over his eyes the helmet that he wasn't wearing, and looked about him, his heart pounding.

They were in a forest, though it seemed to consist only of trees with splintered and smoking crowns. The acrid smell of artillery smoke hung in the air, and Speirs scrambled to his feet and
followed Julian through a maelstrom of flying shrapnel and wood, black clouds of smoke, and men yelling, running, diving for cover. A thick branch exploded off a tree and fell right through Julian's transparent body. Speirs started back when it landed right before his feet, but Julian had not noticed anything and kept on walking. The shelling was worse than any they had seen until now. Speirs kept seeing his men and fellow officers diving into their foxholes, being struck down by fragments of trees and metal, crying out in agony; the pristine white forest floor became muddy, bloody sludge. They stopped suddenly, and if he hadn't passed right through him, Speirs would have bumped into Julian. He stepped aside, and followed Julian's pointing arm. There, in the middle of a small clearing, in a puddle of blood that kept spreading, was his own body."

Victoria gasped, and tears rolled down her cheek. "No! Daddy can't die! You said he would be okay!"
"He will be, he will be," Carwood hushed her. "Just wait a little, sweetheart."

"As Speirs stared at his corpse in disbelief, he heard the sound of running feet behind him. First Sergeant Lipton skidded on the smooth, pounded snow, and fell to his knees just beside Speirs. His brow was furrowed as he touched the body, felt for a pulse, and tried to stop the flow of blood, the cry of 'Medic!' on his lips; but he had come too late, and he broke down in tears as he closed the eyelids and laid his hand on the ashy cheek. After sitting like this for a moment or two, he recollected himself, snapped off one of Speirs' dogtags, stood up again, and went on his way. Around them, the trees kept exploding. Speirs looked at Lipton's retreating back, and he felt a rush of tears come on. He turned his face away and rubbed at his eyes with his sleeve of coarse green cotton, and looked at Julian.

'Please, Julian. Tell me there's a way that I can avoid all this. Please.' But Julian seemed to look through him, and Speirs sank down on his knees, and cried: 'I've seen enough, Julian. I'm gonna be a beter man than I was, I promise. I don't want to die here, not like this.' He reached for Julian's leg, which of course he couldn't touch, and covered his face with his hands, weeping.

He opened his eyes again. The tent was dim, but daylight seeped through the crevices, and he bolted upright. He looked at his watch--it said 7:23 AM.

'Could it be?' he thought. His face was still wet with tears, and he wiped them off with his sleeve, glowing and fluttered with relief of being out of that hellish place, and filled with the desire to put his good resolutions into practice. He threw his blankets aside, and opened the box next to his bed; the silverware glinted and winked at him. 'Still here,' he breathed, and grabbed his helmet, rifle, and a spare C-ration that was lying on his desk. Stuffing the tin in his pocket, he went out, looking around until he located a lone soldier, on his way back to the line.

'Hey! You there!' he called out. The soldier looked up, then around, and pointed to his chest.

'Yeah, you! Come here!' The man walked towards him, and Speirs saw that it was Sergeant Malarkey.

'Malarkey! What day is it?' Malarkey looked at him as if he had asked him when Hitler's birthday was. 'Sir?'

'The date, Malarkey!'

'It's... December 25th, sir. Christmas,' he added, with a wry smile.

'I haven't missed it,' Speirs said to himself. 'It's not too late! Thanks, Sergeant,' he said, and produced the C-ration from his pocket. 'Here you go. Merry Christmas!' Malarkey, who looked very alarmed indeed, nevertheless saluted him, and watched him run on, cautious to see if he would turn around; but he didn't.

'I'll be damned,' he muttered. Speirs sprinted towards headquarters, rushing past men who watched him with a puzzled expression.

'I never seen Speirs run like that unless he had to save his ass, or save his silverware,' one of them said, and the others sniggered.

When he reached headquarters, he went in, panting, and found Major Winters and First Sergeant Lipton discussing the plans for the day.

'Speirs,' said Winters, raising an eyebrow at his agitation. 'Good morning.'
Speirs saluted, and asked: 'What is your plan for today, sir?'

'Well, we were planning on attacking the German positions around--'

'Yes, yes, do it,' Speirs interrupted. 'I think they're gonna give us a hell of a shellacking today, sir. I got a premonition. Best we attack 'em early and keep them from doing too much damage.' Winters looked thunderstruck, but Lipton smiled at him. Speirs felt the blood rush to his head, and smiled back.

'Okay, Speirs. You may be right. But I got my orders from battalion, I'm sending First platoon towards Foy.'

'With respect, sir, I think you're gonna need Second too. We're gonna need all the men we can spare. I'll lead Second, then, sir,' Speirs pleaded, 'and I'll take First Sergeant Lipton with me.' Winters nodded. 'Alright. Pick your men. Move out in one hour.'

Speirs and Lipton deliberated on which men they would pick, and gathered them all together for a briefing. Speirs let Lipton do most of the talking. He watched him from a distance, and felt very proud of his First Sergeant.

Carwood looked up and smiled deviously at Ron, who was leaning against the doorpost with his arms folded, and a mischievous look in his eye that spelled either "You have some explaining to do" or "You're not gonna get much sleep tonight". Ron then smiled at Victoria, who put her finger to her lips, and whispered, "Daddy's reading."

"They attacked Foy, and captured it. Speirs had never felt more alive, and his heart overflowed with happiness; and they spent the night in a church in Foy, where the choir sang Christmas hymns for them. And Speirs went around bringing the men their chow, asking them how they were, collecting their letters and patting them on the back. After almost all of the men had gone to sleep, he sat up writing his report of the patrol when First Sergeant Lipton came to talk to him.

'I had to come and see if the stories were true,' he said with a smile. 'Lieutenant Speirs being the last in line for chow? Handing out extra blankets? Giving away his spare rations? Are you feeling alright, sir?'

Speirs looked up at him, and said brightly, 'Never better, First Sergeant Lipton. And I have something for you as well. Because it's Christmas.' And he stood up, and he gave First Sergeant Lipton...a great big kiss!"

Carwood smothered Victoria with kisses until she cried out with laughter, and jumped off his lap to be picked up by her other daddy, who hauled her up on his arm and kissed her on the cheek.

"Did daddy read you a nice story, Vicky?" he asked, eyeing his husband.

"Yes! And you didn't die!"

"I didn't die," Ron repeated, and lowered her to the ground. "Vicky, I think Santa was a little early this year. Run downstairs and see what he just dropped off for you." Victoria dashed downstairs, and Carwood rose from his seat to embrace his husband. When he was about to kiss him, Speirs said, "I better not hear this version of events when Winters and Nixon come to dinner tomorrow. I got a reputation to keep up."

"They won't hear it from me, Mr. Wide-Eyed Killer," Carwood promised. Ron enveloped him in a tight hug, and they stood like that for a long moment. Ron buried his face in Carwood's shoulder.

"How did you know about George?" he mumbled. Carwood's grip tightened around his waist.

"I found your old photo albums when we moved," he said. "Are you mad that I told her about him?"

Crinkles appeared around Speirs's eyes as a smile broke through on his face, and he took Carwood's face between his hands.

"Bah, humbug!" he whispered.
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