

CAN N.M. I.D.

(Short Story)
1945

NOSTALGIA

by N.M.

Unpublished

It was funny the way we got started talking about soldiering in the States. We had been sitting on one of the little dikes in the rice paddies, listening to the night broadcast from Manila coming out of the radio in the commo truck. There was a new program on with a vocalist who would read letters from fans for requests, and then sing the song. Like a lot of the Filipino girls she would speak English in a little girl's voice, and it reminded me of the style Wee Bonnie Baker started that was so popular for a long time. This singer would say, "I have a letter from Pvt. Jack Scott in the Philippines, and he asks me to sing, 'In My Reverie' which is, as Mr. Scott says, 'his long-time favorite.' Thank you Mr. Scott for all the nice things you say, and I will sing it especially for you."

The last number before the radio had to be turned off to save the gasoline in the generator was 'Rum and Coca-Cola', and we listened very carefully because we had read that it was up on the Hit Parade and this was the first time we had heard the words or the music. When it was done, Grecco who had been beating time with his foot all through it, shook his head disappointedly. He was a funny little Italian guy who would listen to music as hard as anyone I ever knew, and every night when the radio was cut off, he would be nervous for a while as if it took some time for him to become unwound. He'd been assigned as CP guard about the same time Leary and I had been transferred from our old ~~XXXXXX~~ line company, but since he had a mortarman in a different battalion we had hardly known him before.

Now, he didn't say anything for almost a minute, but he kept shaking his head so hard and with so much disgust, that we kept wait-

ing for him to talk. "I been trying to figure out that 'Rum and Coca-Cola' for three weeks now," he finally burst out. "The first time I heard the title, I was bothered by it. You know, what kind of words could go with 'Rum and Coca-Cola', what kind of tune? I'm telling you, it was really getting me. I'd be walking along looking at the guy in front of me, and before I knew it I'd be humming a tune and trying to fit words to it. I must have made up twenty songs, and none of them came even close."

I could tell Leary was irritable. "I suppose you're going to tell us they're all better than the original," he said. Leary was big and quick-tempered but usually he got along with Grecco.

Grecco shook his head again. "No, I ain't going to say anything of the sort. I've forgotten them all already. The only thing, it's like a game with me; I do it with lots of songs. If only I'd gotten some hint, if some guy had heard it, and said, 'yeah, it's like Madame LaZonga or I Went to Havana, you know, Spanish, then I really would have been close."

"I've tried to figure out songs by their titles," Reade, our new replacement, said.

Grecco didn't want to be interrupted. "Sure, everybody does sooner or later", he said, "but with me it's what you call a hobby. I've always done it, I'm an expert at it. You take someone like Irving Berlin, his lyrics are going to seem pretty flat if you read them first without the music, but you got to take into account that it's going to be pretty catchy when they add the tune. Berlin was so tricky that with him I would only try to figure out the music." Then without stopping, Grecco said, "Or take this song, 'I'm Living Off The U. S. A.'."

"I don't think Berlin wrote that," I said.

"Who said he did?" Grecco said. "All I said was take this song, 'I'M Living Off The U. S. A.'. That's an example of the easy kind. I heard the title just once, and I said to myself, 'March music, only swung,' and you should have seen how close I came." None of us said anything, and Grecco became quiet again, and kept looking moodily across the dried up rice paddies.

Since the radio had been turned off, it had gotten completely dark and in the distance we could hear the artillery firing again. As if it had been a signal one of our guerrillas began to fire too. We had picked up a platoon of them a few weeks before to guard the CP, and now we had them entrenched along our perimeter. They had a habit of shooting at anything that made any noise, which meant that almost every morning there would be a detail to collect the dead little Filipino dogs and bury them in the sump hole near the field kitchen. This time there was a space of a few seconds between his first shot and the second but the third came very quickly. We heard a yelp and then the slow dying moans of the dog as if he had been run over by a truck.

Leary began to curse. "Those Filipinos know Goddam well it's a dog. I tell you those buggers just like the idea of killing. With the moonlight around here, you'd have to be night blind not to tell the difference between a dog and a man." We didn't say anything. The truth was we were still a little jumpy. We had been living like this in the same paddy for over two weeks, guarding a road and keeping outposts and patrols in the hills. Nothing ever happened here and the Japs were at least ten miles away, but in the last sector the CP had been up on the line, and we had stood guard in our holes along the perimeter, and sweated and strained at every noise. Our ponchos had been pitched high over our holes, and we used to sit there in the

darkness and look out from under them. Every time there was a shot we would duck, and then slowly sit up again, and just stare and stare into the moonlight until the grenade would become so wet and leaden in our hands it seemed as if we could hardly throw it more than two yards.

Now of course it was nothing like this, but yet I knew why Leary was so angry at the guerillas. We sat there for awhile just looking at the same bright moon and at the silver color it gave to the poncho pup tents, and the black-green shadows it threw along the low ridge lines of the rice dikes. I don't suppose any of us had said anything, until Grecco began to hum 'I'm Living Off The U. S. A.' This made Reade laugh, and I thought at first it was because Grecco had been quiet for so long, and then started singing the same song he had been talking about before the shots were fired.

"What's so funny?" Leary asked. We didn't particularly like Reade who was a cocky kid, but for a replacement he had been pretty cool in the last sector.

"I don't know," Reade said, "every time Grecco sings that, he gets me thinking about my old mess sergeant." Reade could tell a good story, and he knew it, which might have been the reason he always started one by saying that something reminded him of somebody he used to know. He began telling us now about the mess sergeant who was a tall skinny hillbilly with a habit of always mumbling to himself. "Old Harris," Reade said, "would be grumbling away, and then suddenly you'd hear him say something like 'man, that was a dawg. . . Boy!' only he'd say 'Boy' so it sounded like 'Bwo-o-oy!.' Reade made a long hoarse thick sound, and we began to laugh; Reade had a way of imitating people that could make you see them.

"Old Harris just couldn't stand to have any waste," Reade went on. "If you ever tried to scrape a hunk of toast off your plate into the can, he would hold up the whole garbage line, and make a little speech about not wasting anything. He'd be standing there about a head taller than anyone else, stooping over and shaking a finger at us, excited as hell. About every two seconds he'd get so excited he'd have to stop and then he'd yell 'Bwoyy'. We used to stand there and go 'yes, sergeant', 'no, sergeant', 'that's right', 'sergeant', trying all the time to keep from laughing until we got outside."

It was easy to sit there listening to Reade and for the first time that night I could hear the crickets begin their sputtering and twanging. For some reason it reminded me of a Jew's Harp and I could imagine Harris playing one outside some country store. "I remember one morning," Reade said, "we were in the mess-hall, the sleepest bunch of Godforsaken Joes you'd ever want to see. It was a Monday in the middle of winter, and it was still dark and cold out. You know how you used to feel then, as if you'd never wake up. Well, I was sitting there drooling over my plate___" The way Reade said 'drooling' made us laugh again. It had been over two years since we had eaten breakfast in a mess hall with the lights turned because it was still dark at six, but Reade really brought it back, and it gave a nice kind of feeling to think of the heat in the mess, and the way no one ever said anything until the hot coffee had warmed us up. "There I was," Reade said, "sick as a dog after Sunday night, and what happens but old Harris comes walking down the row between the benches over to the cadre table, and he's got about six hot cakes on his plate, and so much oatmeal in his bowl that it was running off the sides. He wasn't looking at anything but that food, and he

just kept smiling and smiling, and every now and then he'd sing, 'I'm Livin' Off The U. S. A. . . . Bwoy! Oh, I'm Livin' Off The U. S. A. Bwo-o-o-oy! "

Somehow that story seemed funnier than anything we had heard for weeks. I kept laughing and laughing, surprised myself at how long I kept on, and I could feel everything inside me beginning to loosen up and glow. When we stopped it seemed as if everybody had a story to tell. Leary seemed in a good mood again and he started to tell Reade about Hiram Janniford, and how in the two years he had been the regiment's wire chief we had never seen him laugh. "That guy," Leary said, "only knew two words, 'Wha-a-at?' and 'Shove it'!" Leary said 'Wha-a-at?' the way Reade said 'Bwoy', and while that wasn't exactly right I didn't say anything. I had never thought about Hiram as being particularly funny but now suddenly there seemed so many stories to remember about him. "Once," Leary said, "when we were on maneuvers in Tennessee, Hiram went to sleep under a tree during a break, and Major Wilcox came along and woke him up. If there was anything that Hiram hated, it was to be waked up any time of day or night. He jerked up to a sitting position, still half-blind, and then he swung at the Major's hand, and shouted, "Wha-a-at?"

"Wha-a-at?" the Major yelles, "what the hell do you mean by going to sleep? The line to Div Arty has been out for over an hour."

'Aaah, skove it,' Hiram said, and then he looked up and saw who it was, and without moving a muscle he sort of spits out 'Sir'." Leary shook his head, and repeated it, "Aaah, shove it. . . sir," and we laughed a little .

"Where ~~is~~ is the guy now?" Reade asked, "I've never seen him in the wire section."

"He got transferred about a year ago," I said.

Grecco looked up. "Did you know he got killed?"

Leary whistled. "I never knew that."

"Yeah," Grecco said, "it's a fact. I knew a good buddy of his back in my old company, and he heard about it from a girl they both used to write to."

"How'd it happen?" I asked.

"Oh, I Don't know," Grecco said, "she never wrote any of the details. All we heard was that Hiram got killed."

"That's too bad," Leary said, but I knew he was more interested than sorry. We really didn't feel bad any longer; it was more like hearing that somebody you used to know slightly a few years ago had gotten married. I tried to think of some of the men in the outfit who had been killed, but there were so many, and some of them had happened so long ago that I could hardly remember the names. With most of them you weren't even sure any longer whether they were dead; they were mixed up with the men who had gone back on rotation or had gone to hospitals and never returned to the outfit, and with men who were now discharged. You knew the name and remembered that something had happened to him, but whether he was dead was sometimes good for a long argument.

"Yeah, it's too bad," Leary said again, "but I never really liked him. I guess this is the first time I've thought about him in quite awhile." There was a time when we would say only good things about the men who had been killed, but we were so used to it by now that it seemed a little too much like a funeral service not to say what you thought. And in a way that was better because it didn't remind you so much that he was dead, and it was important not to keep thinking about the men who had gotten killed. You were close to cracking when you got to the point where every time you

went out on a patrol you wondered if this was the day you were coming back on a litter. There was a trail on Aitape where our platoon had to go out every morning on a combat patrol, and almost every night when we got back we had lost a man or two. We went out every day for a week and a half, and the only way Leary and I got through it was by not thinking about what had happened the day before. There was only one way to take it, and that was to bitch about the heat, and how lousy the trail was, and how our platoon always got the dirtiest jobs in the company, and if we kept it up long enough we began to believe that the only thing we hated was to hike for so many hours in the jungle.

Grecco and Leary were remembering all of the characters who had been in the outfit at one time or another, and by now they would start laughing as soon as they mentioned the name. I listened to them for awhile, and then I told "Leade about Zcyskinski who was a little simple and wanted only to drive a jeep. They never would trust him with one out of the motor pool area, but they used to let him back one up about ten yards, and let it forward and then back it up again. The way I told the story he used to do that every spare minute he had, but the truth was he'd go to the motor pool only once in a while when he got into a certain kind of mood. I knew I was exaggerating, but somehow the story seemed just as true the way I told it.

Leary and Grecco were talking now about Blackie who had been Leary's old First Sergeant before he had been hospitalized and then discharged. "I swear," Grecco said, "he took over our company for a week and Uncle Blackie was the most ignorant son of a bitch I ever knew in the army. Do you remember those speeches he used to

make at retreat when he'd try to use big words?"

"Listen," Leary said, "I was talking to him once, and he started to tell me about this buddy of his who lived in Rhode Island, Connecticut. I said, 'Blackie, he can't live in Rhode Island Connecticut'. So of course Blackie starts yelling at me, 'Why can't he?' I tell him, 'Blackie, Rhode Island and Connecticut are two states, two separate states'. He thinks for a minute then he shakes his head. 'Listen, Leary', he says, patting me on the shoulder, and sort of sighing as if he was my father and proud of me, but also mad because I was such an ornery kid, 'Listen, Bill', he says, 'I Don't know nothin' about that there Rhode Island country cause I never been there, but don't be too sure your Uncle Blackie is wrong cause ain't you ever heard of Kansas City, Missouri and they's two states'.

Reade had never heard that story before, and of course he laughed pretty hard. Leary was beginning to feel pretty mellow, and he told the one about Blackie's girl friend who didn't like him to drink, and how Blackie used to worry about getting caught. "There was one night in Fayetteville when I met Blackie on the street," Leary told Reade, "and he x comes up to me, and says, 'Leary, what's that there black stuff you take to get the sin off your breath', when of course what he meant was 'scent'. 'I don't know, Blackie', I say, 'but maybe you mean Sen-Sen'. 'That's the stuff', Blackie says, and I'm about to go away when he grabs me by the shoulder. 'No, wait a minute, Leary, they's some other stuff too, it's in balls and white. That's the thing I use most the time. It don't come in packages, it's loose'. Well, I think and think and I'm about to give up, when Uncle Blackie smiles and says,

'Never mind, Bill boy, I got it now, it's what they call camphum balls'."

Grecco immediately thought of another boner Blackie had made, but I wasn't listening. I was thinking of all the things that had happened when we were back in the states, and now they seemed very nice, the kind of things you got a kick out of remembering. I had never thought there was anything I liked about those days, but now I felt happy thinking of the gigs, and the hours in the pits on the rifle range, and the Saturday nights in town when we got drunk and walked down the main street seeing nothing but soldiers. It had been like a game then, and while most of us didn't like it, still it was a game and there were always ways to break the rules. Somehow we could never believe that the whole thing wasn't a conspiracy to make us miserable, and it was good to be able to believe that.

Just then, an artillery battery about two miles away, fired into the hills. It was a Battery Left or Battery Right, and each of the four guns went off in turn about two seconds apart. It came so suddenly and loudly that Grecco stopped talking about Blackie in the middle of a sentence. In the night, the guns made long clanging sounds like a freight train jerking and snapping itself up a steep grade. We had been hearing artillery all night, but this was the first time it had been near enough to jolt us.

The battery fired again. I thought of the shells going up and out until maybe they were a mile high, and then coming down and down into the hills where the Japs were hiding. And again the sound made me think of the freight train, and I could see it shake, and all the cars slap at each other as the shock travelled down the line.

We were all very quiet, so quiet that I wondered if maybe Leary and Grecco and even Heade, had been thinking for a little while that we were soldiers again back in the states, and we had been playing the game we had not liked of living in barracks and standing rifle inspections on the company street. Grecco whistled nervously, listening to the echoes of the artillery, and then he said, "Boy, somebody's going to catch hell in about ten seconds." By the way he said it, I knew that Grecco anyway had also been thinking of things like our old barracks and the shells that were coming down now in the hills. And I knew that like me he was waiting for the noise they would make when they hit.

Lugon Jan + Feb 1945

