

“The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother.”

Theodore Hesburgh

Dear Edie –

I heard a song on the radio this afternoon, and it reminded me of you: *Hello, lump of sugar, you lookin' mighty sweet!*

Well, first of all – I wanted to let you know that I'm fine, and that I'm still doing my best to stop old Hirohito in his tracks!

I sure hope you're feeling well. I also wish I could be there to feel the baby kicking. I think about you and that little rascal at least 20 times a day, and I always fall asleep wishing you were right here beside me.

I'm feeling a little bit down this evening. We lost a couple of great pilots on recent missions, and the chaplain held a memorial service for them this morning. It's no fun to stand on the deck with your head lowered in prayer, wishing those guys would come back.

I'm here to job, though, and you know I will. But I don't mind telling you – after only a few days of flying missions, the whole idea of warfare strikes me as pretty sad.

It's me or them, however – and I can promise you that I don't intend to let anything – or anyone – stop me from getting back home one day to the Delta, and to that little boy or girl you're carrying around. Shall we call him Elmer or Edith? Or do you have a better name in mind?

Well, I better get to sleep. We're going back into action tomorrow, and I need to be rested, just in case I come across any Japanese gentlemen during my airborne cruise around the North Pacific!

Love you and thinking always of you.

Your Johnny

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Seven a.m. in the main squad room.

The captain looked even grouchier than normal.

“Men, I don't want to get into the business of speculation here, but I'd say there's a pretty good chance that you'll get to play with some of your toys today. The latest Intel from Naval Air Group Command says we've got a pair of Jap carriers steaming our way as I speak.

“These bad boys are only 350 miles out. They're heading south from the Marianas, and they're already reconnoitering our waters. All of which means that you're likely to see some action, and maybe even this afternoon.”

He looked around the squad room. “Today is *not* the day for grab-ass up there at 12,000 feet. Are we clear?”

The pilots were all nodding.

“And don't forget: you aren't Superman. Okay? Leave that to the guys who write the comic book. If you don't like the odds when you make contact, just back off and live to fight another day.”

More nods.

“May God be with all of you. “Dismissed.”

They rose, stretched . . . and began drifting toward the carrier deck, where 125 warplanes had already been fueled.

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He was daydreaming again.

The Yankees were playing the Red Sox . . . and the Bronx Bombers were up at the plate. *There’s a hard line drive to left, and it drops in – another single for the mighty mite in Yankee pinstripes, shortstop Frankie Crosetti!*

Eyes on the drifting cirrus clouds beneath his cruising Wildcat, Johnny laughed out loud. As a kid from Missouri, he was honor-bound to support the Cardinals in St. Louis, and he did – but darn if there wasn’t something *bold*, something swaggering and cocky and stylish about the Yanks that he really liked.

Let’s see . . . Crosetti was hitting fifth this year, so who would follow him? Why, that would be outfielder Charlie Keller, of course. Grinning like a kid with a new toy, Johnny continued to imagine the Yankees vs. the Red Sox: *Now Keller leans away from an inside pitch, shoulder high, and that’s ball one. This guy is a terrific outfielder, but he’s also a great hitter. Natural ability, you know? Whoops . . . there’s another brush-back, chin high, and Keller doesn’t like it at all – he’s glaring out toward the mound. If this continues, we could see some fireworks out here, and pretty soon. Now the pitcher winds, kicks –*

There was a crackle of static, and a voice said: “Your two o’clock, Charlie Six Pack – here he comes. Here he comes!”

Johnny barely had time to blink. Like a screaming metal hawk, the Japanese Zero came blazing at him from the port side, right at eye level. His machine guns were clattering, and the propeller winked and glittered like a fabulous jewel lit up by the afternoon sun.

The rounds were streaking past Johnny's cockpit now, a swarm of killer bees intent on annihilation, and all he could do was pray for a miss. But no such luck – with a jolt of fear, he felt the cockpit shudder violently as a .50-millimeter slug knifed through the thin metal skin of the aircraft. He'd taken at least one hit . . . and he'd also come within a few yards of a mid-air collision, as the Zero shot past him and vanished into the clouds.

He smelled gasoline . . . his own, or was it leaking from one of the other damaged planes in the sky around him? But there was no time to waste on speculation: Once again, the radio was buzzing with frantic voices. "Charlie, you're throwing some smoke. You're throwing some smoke. Do you read me?"

"You've got a mechanical problem, hoss – might want to make sure you can exit that thing, if you need to. Are you reading me, Charlie? Over."

He hit the button on the console, barked at his wingman: "I'm reading you, Six-Niner. Copy that. I took a round on that last pass, but I'm still flying. Are you seeing black smoke? Is it black? Over."

"Negative, Charlie. Light gray. It's thinning out now. Maybe you're okay – hang on, I've got company! Over."

He hit the button on the mike – but before he could respond, two Zeros appeared directly behind him. He had exactly five seconds before the first tracers would start

chewing through the sky toward his plane. *Okay, here goes,* he thought. *Eddie, I really miss you right now.*

He pushed the stick far forward, and the nose of the Wildcat shivered once then dropped over the edge. It was like those cartoons you saw in the funny papers – Wily Coyote’s chasing the Road Runner, and he runs right off the cliff, and he doesn’t realize it at first. He’s hanging there, feet still churning, motionless on the air.

Then he drops like a shot.

The fighter was in a steep dive now – so steep that Johnny knew he might not be able to pull out in time. But it was the only ace he had left in his hand. The Japs had missed him, they’d flown right over him, but he knew they were doing high-speed U-turns, and he knew they’d be back. Still, it wouldn’t matter, if he didn’t find a way to pull out of the dive.

Dizzy now, with his vision blurring, he could see the altimeter needle spinning wildly out of one corner of one eye. He had to get some air under the wings, and that meant taking the ultimate risk – what the pilots called “goosing the stick,” a last-ditch maneuver that would either yank the nose up – like a high-speed roller coaster at the bottom of a dip – or lock the plane into a terminal dive from which there would be no escape.

And if that happened, he’d hit the ocean at around 240 miles an hour – a velocity in which ordinary seawater takes on the density of solid concrete and anything striking it at that speed is instantly atomized into fine, windblown dust.

The nose came up. Engines screaming, the roller coaster zoomed out of the dip and climbed on her tiptoes straight up into the cobalt sky. The G-forces were so

strong, they nearly tore Johnny's oxygen mask from his face. He tasted salt . . . oh, *blood*. His nose was gushing hemoglobin and the stuff was pouring into his mouth. But he was still alive. Somehow, he was still breathing. The Jap Zeros had vanished for the moment. The cold Pacific air was roaring through the cockpit, but his aircraft was still viable, apparently –

Then the air lit up, starboard side, and he watched a toxic mushroom-cloud blacken and blossom not 40 yards distant. Anti-aircraft fire? Destroyers? The Nips weren't supposed to have any ships in the area, but this stuff was coming from below, from long guns mounted to the decks of warships –

The impact arrived: *whump*. The Wildcat yawed to the left, and the engine made a choking sound, and then began to balk and stammer. Had he thrown a rod? *Whump*, another body blow landed, and he was reminded of the little bit of boxing he'd done in high school. When the other guy hits you in the ribs, you can feel it all the way down to your shoe tops –

Whump. The sky was black with gunpowder now, and his engine was coughing badly. Whistling a little, and refusing to give in to his fear, he nursed the throttle: *Come on, come on, don't quit on me, don't give up on me now, come on, baby, get me home, get me back to terra firma, only a few more minutes, come on, do me right!*

But it was too late, and he knew it. He was at least 40 nautical miles from the carrier deck, and he was losing RPMs fast. *Whump*. The artillery shells were exploding all over the sky now; the air, itself, appeared to have caught fire in a dozen different places, and the entire horizon was crackling with deadly shrapnel.

And Johnny Andrews was losing altitude.

Mayday! Mayday! He heard himself shouting the word in his mike, again and again, but there was blood all over the mouthpiece, everything was soaked, and he couldn't be sure the radio was working any more. He had 30 seconds to decide. Stay on board and try to ride her through a crash landing on the water, or hit the silk?

She could go at any moment, he told himself. *You don't know how bad she's been hit.*

And that was the decider. Raising his left foot, he began kicking at the door latch on his side of the cockpit. It stuck for a moment, and his blood ran cold, but then, mercifully, it broke cleanly away and the 150-mile-an-hour wind took the door off as if it had been made of Kleenex.

A moment later, he was fighting his way out of the harness.

Over the side! Wily Coyote runs right off the cliff!

Now he was tumbling through space, and fumbling for the ripcord on the parachute.

Was this real, or was he dreaming it? The water was only 1,800 feet away, when he finally pulled the cord. The pale green chute came ripping out of the pack – like a fat, crazed snake, it whipped back and forth on the stormy air, then blossomed.

Poof.

The jump instructors had a word – actually, three words – for this extraordinary moment: *I've got canopy.*

He hung there for at least 20 seconds, like a man suspended in the middle of a painting, before he could determine that he was in fact descending toward the jade-green Pacific.

Stunned and half delirious, he kept remembering the line he'd read in a hundred

different thrillers over the years: *All at once, my entire life flashed before my eyes!*

It was true. While his parachute belled above (oh, blessed canopy!), and while he watched the foamy wave-tops rising to meet him, Johnny Andrews was replaying a lifetime of memory-tapes in his overheated brain.

Look – there he was, zipping along on his red tricycle, while his poor Momma struggled to catch up: “Slow down, Johnny, you’re gonna run over somebody with that thing!”

And *look* again – there he was, an awkward, desperately shy eighth-grader, leaning against a wall of the junior high school gym, as the “Sock Hop” unfolded all around him. Streams of bright green and yellow crepe paper . . . and the DJ spinning records in the big neon-lit booth above their heads: “Okay, kids, here comes the big 1936 song you’ve all been waiting for – *Every time it rains it rains* . . . *Pennies From Heaven!*”

And *look* again – there he was, parked on Lovers Lane, parked on the dirt road that flanked Irrigation Ditch No. 16, with the full moon like a great bronze medallion hanging above the old Chevy, and the shadows of hunting owls skimming over the grass. And this young woman in his arms – *not* Edie, and that was wrong, because he was married now, but the young woman in his arms – how could he ever mistake that perfume? Diane!

He was dropping fast.

And this was the North Pacific. Although most days were bright and sunny, the currents that roiled the great ocean below him were cold. They were still frigid, in fact, after their brush with distant Antarctica, and they would kill you quickly. The

scientific name for it was “hypothermia.” Once he hit the water, he would have two hours, maybe three at the most, before the gelid saltwater robbed him of the heat he needed to stay alive. .

He went in feet first, and he barely made a splash.

Strangely enough, his last thought before touchdown was a message directed not at Edie, but at Diane, the woman he’d never really forgotten, the Queen of the Delta, at least in his eyes: *Babe, if only you could see me now.*