

THE
GOATS OF
SANTO DOMINGO

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THE GOATS OF SANTO DOMINGO

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TO THE FORTY-FOUR AMERICAN SERVICEMEN WHO
DIED DURING THAT FORGOTTEN DEPLOYMENT.
AND TO BILL EILAND OF MIAMI, FLORIDA (1945-1966).
HE WAS THERE.

JOHN ROMERO

CHAPTER ONE

John Romero fell in love with her on a spring day in Santo Domingo. That alone played a large part in what would change his life. He had only twenty days left in the Army when he looked across the concertina wire and saw her poised on that lawn chair just inside the rebel zone. There were other factors that contributed to his misfortune, such as the murder of Sergeant Petrenko that compounded his troubles. Then there were the misguided decisions he made. He never thought that he would be drafted into the Army. The threat of induction by the Selective Service System would occasionally idle in the back of his mind, but he never took the time to learn about deferments. Many times he'd bash himself for not joining the National Guard when he had the chance to avoid the draft. He had kicked around in the minor leagues for a few years before being drafted into the service. An injury to the elbow of his pitching arm wasn't serious enough to disqualify him from military service. Once in the Army he made another unwise decision—he went airborne and joined the paratroopers. The only reason he had for that move was that his favorite uncle was a paratrooper, and he was curious as to what it was like to jump from an airplane at twelve hundred feet. He had been counting the remaining months, weeks, and days he had left in the Army ever since he got back to the States from Okinawa, where he had served a year. After he was assigned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, he got into a pick-up baseball game and was surprised he felt no pain when he tested his arm. Romero then got it into his head that he could get back into baseball after his discharge. He

began working out with the post baseball team and practiced developing his forkball. After making a few phone calls, he was able to get a semi-pro team to hold a roster spot open for him with the proviso that he would join the team by the middle of June. With just over six weeks left to serve—exactly 46 days—his unit was deployed to the Dominican Republic on April 28, 1965. It was supposed to be a simple mission: evacuate American citizens caught up in the civil war.

It didn't sink in that this could be a combat operation. To Romero, it felt like just another drill the Army was putting him through; even when he was issued a basic load of ammunition and two canisters of hand grenades. It had the feeling of another practice run when his unit landed at the Dominican air base in San Isidro. When his platoon approached Santo Domingo, and he saw the tracers flickering across the river, it still had the semblance of a training exercise. It wasn't until Lieutenant Stiller got hit in the leg from a sniper's bullet that Romero realized this was no dress rehearsal. If he had taken a hit like that, it would've ended any chance he had of getting back into baseball. After the lieutenant caught it, Romero went about his business with somber discipline.

"Our platoon is staying here in reserve," Sergeant Dixon said to the men in Romero's squad. "B and the rest of A Company are going to cross the bridge and enter the city." The sky lit up across the river, and the vibrations of battle rumbled across the city as B and A Company pushed to link up with the Marines and establish a line of communication. The rebel faction that was in revolt against the U.S.-recognized established government took exception to American troops in their city. They put up a wall of resistance until they found themselves out-gunned. Romero was standing on the edge of a war. He kept hoping it would all be resolved before he was ordered into Santo Domingo.

"What stinks?" Rosen asked. "Did somebody drop a lit match down their shorts?"

"That's the smell of burning bodies," Sergeant Petrenko said. "Don't try to get used to it—you never will."

Romero lived on whatever bits and pieces of information Sergeant Dixon would tell his squad. “We’ll go home as soon as the American citizens are evacuated,” he’d say.

“Well, where are they?” Romero kept asking.

“The Marines are taking some out by boat, and I heard others are being trucked to San Isidro to fly out—that’s all I know.” Romero waited for the order to re-deploy—no word came and his unit remained in position.

Like most ballplayers, he was superstitious. He stopped counting the days until his ETS because it was getting so close. He knew that when bad things happened, it was usually late in the game. He sifted through every rumor looking for any nugget that might contain the slightest hope that the mission was concluding so he could go back to practicing his pitch location. But every day and night there was gunfire and explosions across the river. Sometimes it would rage all night, and Romero took that as a bad sign. The reports that more American troops were landing at San Isidro every hour also clouded any optimism.

“Play it safe,” he kept telling himself, “and don’t stick your neck out; just a few more days and you’ll be home free.” One night the rebels lobbed mortar shells over the river that landed near his position. He was thankful that the heavy mud of the riverbank muffled the explosions; many of the shells were duds that whistled in and then went—plop.

His platoon was ordered back to San Isidro for a day’s rest. He limbered up his pitching arm by throwing rocks at a palm tree. A letter came from his brother, Richard. He was in college on a music scholarship, where he played the violin. In the letter, Richard asked his older brother if he had seen the freshly minted quarters and dimes with the new copper edges. He wrote that he had seen the fighting on the evening news, and had read in the newspaper that the main rebel force was pressed into a two square mile section of the city with their backs to the sea and flanked by the river. The Marines had them corked in on the west. Richard wondered what John was still doing there since the American citizens were all evacuated.

Romero missed getting letters from Carla. She had written him regularly after he was inducted into the Army. He had met her while playing Double A in San Antonio. He was getting ready to ship back to the States from Okinawa when she wrote that she had met another. Carla- Carla-Carla. He was thinking of her more since she had cut him loose than when they had routinely exchanged letters. He was thinking of her again the next morning when his platoon was ordered to move into Santo Domingo.

* * * *

A coil of concertina wire stretched down the middle of the street between the sandbags Romero stood behind and her turquoise house. Behind him was a schoolhouse that his unit had occupied since their arrival. The old structure reminded Romero of the Alamo.

“Keep your eye on that house,” Rosen had said to him. “You’ll see her if you get posted at the sandbags; she comes out every morning around nine and reads a book for half an hour—a real beauty queen.” Romero had heard the other men in his squad talking about her. They referred to her as Miss Santo Domingo, the Princess, or the Dominican Damsel.

The door opened on the brightly painted stucco house. She wore a short white skirt, the hem well above the knee. The lawn chair she held was unfolded with a nobility of motion, the way a virtuoso opens his violin case. She sat down, crossed her shapely legs, and opened a book before setting it daintily on her lap. For a confused moment, Romero was convinced she was Carla. He stepped out from behind the sandbags and was a few strides off the curb before the coiled barbs stopped him. The closer view made him see that it wasn’t Carla after all. She was somebody else—a stranger—both mysterious and recognizable. She was perhaps Miss Swanson, his fourth grade teacher to whom he had written his first love letter and hid it in his school bag. There was a bit of Anna about her, too, the little girl who’d lived across the street from him when he was twelve. She was someone who

had once held him tight, but not close enough—someone who had left and gone away.

A real Spanish *Contessa*, he thought.

She wore her black hair up in a beehive, or was it called a French twist? He only knew that he hadn't seen any other Dominican women wear their hair that way. That style took a lot of hairspray to hold, and hairspray was hard to come by in a city that had been ripped apart by civil war.

She turned a page, and Romero became curious as to what she was reading. He knew he should have waved at her when she first appeared. It would've looked foolish to wave after she had opened her book. He stepped back behind the sandbags.

The past two days had been quiet. The latest cease-fire was holding for the most part. Now the mission was to take a defensive position along the northern line of the rebel zone and not fire unless fired upon. The streets were paved, and the buildings were stucco and cinder block. It wasn't the most prosperous of neighborhoods, but it was better than the dirt streets down by the river where Romero's squad had cleared out snipers from wooden shacks.

His Spanish *Contessa* turned another page, and Romero rested his elbows on top of a sandbag and watched. Since the cease-fire, civilian traffic had increased on each side of the wire; mostly vintage American cars and pickup trucks. Three-wheeled scooters throttled past with loads of produce.

The Dominican beauty shifted her weight in the chair. Through the ninety feet that separated them, he could see himself opening the door for her to get into his Buick. They were on a date back home. Romero liked the way she rubbed her hand over the leather upholstery. He introduced her to his buddies, and their noses opened.

A gun jeep from the recon platoon drove by, and the driver waved at Romero. The gun crew gawked at his *Contessa*. They wore a lewd itch in their expressions. He was wondering what he looked like to her when Sergeant Dixon elbowed him in the ribs.

“Have you been thinking about those drawers, Romero?”

“Too bad she has to live on the other side of the wire,” Romero answered. “Did you ever see a babe that looked so delicate and dangerous at the same time?”

“Dangerous is right—like a black widow. One hump and die.”

“It would almost be worth it.”

“What makes her so tempting is that you can’t have her. As long as she’s in the rebel zone she’s off limits, out of reach; you get it? *Verboten*. That wire’s there not to keep the rebels corralled in their territory, it’s to keep us out.”

“We’re the ones that put it there.” Romero said.

“It only acts as a marker to establish the boundary, but in some places it’s spotty so you don’t know exactly where you are. A couple of journalists found that out yesterday.”

“What happened?”

“Their car wandered into the rebel zone, and they were both shot up pretty bad. One’s dead and the other is close to it.” He pointed to Romero’s *Contessa*, “The same will happen to anybody else who goes over there.”

“There’s something familiar about her,” Romero said. “Don’t you recognize her from someplace?”

“I’ve seen her everywhere I’ve been: Korea, Germany, Panama, Lebanon, where else do you want to go?” And in the same breath, “Have you thought about re-enlisting?”

He put his hand on Romero’s shoulder. “It’s never too late.”

Romero pointed to a yellow building across the street that was on the corner of an intersection. “What does that sign say scrawled on the wall?”

“Yankee go home.”

“I’m taking that advice.”

“You can buy a new car with the re-up bonus.”

“No thanks.”

“Do you have a girl waiting for you back home?” the sergeant asked.

“Not anymore,” Romero said. Then his *Contessa* looked up briefly as she bent the book back on its spine.

“What happened?”

“I got a Dear John letter when I was stationed on Okinawa,” Romero said, raising his voice while an old Studebaker drove by with a bad muffler. He couldn’t keep his eyes off the way she was sitting. Her pose gave the ordinary lawn chair a glamour all its own as her skirt inched up when she shifted her weight.

“That didn’t make you consider reenlisting?” Sergeant Dixon paused, “...the Dear John letter I mean.”

“No, and I’ve never thought of reenlisting. I’ve never thought of suicide or joining the French Foreign Legion either.”

“Hey—okay, don’t get mad, I didn’t mean to give you a case of the ass. Sometimes a Dear John can put a lick on a guy.”

“I guess I saw it coming, so I wasn’t too surprised.”

“You were her G.I. insurance policy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you get it?”

“No,” Romero answered. He wondered if Dixon was going to go into one of his ‘back home in Alabama’ philosophical renditions.

“When a girl has a steady guy far away in the service, she’s got insurance, the security of a boyfriend. Since he’s far away, she’s available if something better comes along. If that happens and it works out for her, she can dump the G.I. All it takes is a letter.”

Romero set his rifle on top of the sandbags. He watched her and listened to him.

“On the other hand,” Sergeant Dixon held up his palm, “if nothing better comes along that interests her, she still has the soldier when he comes home. It’s a good plan, and she can cancel at any time.”

The *Contessa* uncrossed her legs. “Don’t you think I should’ve been shipped back to the States by now?” Romero asked.

“Don’t worry,” Sergeant Dixon said and smiled. “The Army isn’t going to forget about you. It’ll be any day now.”

“Have you heard anything about being redeployed?”

“No,” Sergeant Dixon said. “Just rumors, nothing official. Is that the only song you know?”

“It’s the only one I want to sing right now.”

Romero’s beautiful *Contessa* looked over at him before she glanced skyward. She closed her book. The sun dimmed. She stood up and folded her chair. The concert for today was over. Her violin had been put away. Rain pattered on Romero’s helmet, and she disappeared through the doorway.

The shower stopped before he could unroll his poncho. A black goat came up to him and rubbed his nose on the sandbags.

“Hi there, horny,” Dixon said and gave the goat a cigarette. He laughed. “These things will eat anything. When I was a kid, I fed a goat a pack of firecrackers, the next day he was dead.” He petted the goat between the horns. “I’ve a meeting to go to, keep your eyes open.”

The goat followed Dixon into the school courtyard. In an hour the heat would be radiating off the buildings in flimsy lines. Romero unscrewed the cap from his canteen and splashed his wrist. A three-wheeled Cushman scooter with a load of bananas drove by. The small engine sputtered out of time.

A boy came up to the sandbags. A wooden case of Coca-Cola bottles hung from his shoulders by a canvas strap. “Coca-Cola *mucho frio*,” he hawked at Romero.

Romero put his hand on one of the bottles; it was warm. The boy wore a filthy tee shirt that hung to his knees. “How much?”

“*Veinte cinco*.”

“Give me one.”

The boy tore off the cap with a bottle opener that hung from his neck on an old shoelace. Romero handed him an American fifty-cent piece. The boy studied it and handed him a Dominican twenty-five-cent coin for change. An American quarter would’ve been better. The boy’s feet were bare, so Romero kept quiet.

“*Gracias*,” the boy said and shifted the weight of his load before walking away.

Romero sipped the cola and felt the bubbles expand in his mouth. He looked at the turquoise house. A shoeshine boy asked him if he could polish his boots, Romero told him no. A woman that was a head taller than him wanted to know if she could do his laundry for fifty cents a bag. "*Ropa, ropa,*" she said, making a scrubbing motion on top of a sandbag.

"Tomorrow," he said to her, and his eyes were drawn back to the turquoise house. A man walking with a limp asked him if he wanted his picture taken. The man pointed to his Polaroid Swinger to augment his broken English. Romero told him to keep moving.

Private First Class Richard Rosen walked out of the school courtyard. The goat followed. "Sergeant Dixon wants to see you," he said with a yawn.

"He was just here . . ." Romero hesitated, ". . . maybe he's going to tell me to start packing."

"Has that cutie been out today?" Rosen asked, looking across the street and nodding at the turquoise house.

"You missed her, the show is over."

"Yankees," the gunmen yelled. They were on the roof of the yellow building at the intersection—two of them. Rebels. They waved their rifles. "Yankee pigs," they chanted and grabbed their groins. One rebel was chubby, the other tall and thin. They had been taunting the Americans since their arrival. Rosen referred to them as the "hecklers." The portly one leaned over the parapet and pointed to the scrawl on the wall: YANKEE GO HOME. Romero pressed himself against the sandbags.

"They're trying to provoke us again," Rosen said. The rebel pair laughed before going away.

Romero walked toward the courtyard entrance with his eyes on the roofline of the yellow building. He brushed against an old man pushing a vegetable cart. A jeep nosed out of the gate. Captain Lunt sat stiffly in the passenger seat.

Romero wondered if he should salute. At Fort Bragg it was automatic, but this was Santo Domingo. The captain motioned the driver to stop. He

glared at Romero. The captain had a rash on his neck from shaving too close, and the sweat on his jaw gave his face a blue tint. “I understand you speak Spanish,” he said to Romero.

“Yes, sir,” Romero answered, knowing his Spanish was passable. He could hold a decent conversation. His grandmother had taught him all the Spanish he knew, though his father didn’t approve of Spanish being spoken in the house. “You’ll never make any money in America speaking Spanish,” he would rant at his brother and him.

“I’m sending you to work with the support platoon. It’s a food and water distribution detail. Sergeant Dixon has the particulars.”

“Yes, sir,” Romero said and thought this would be a good time to salute. He put his hand to his eyebrow. The captain returned the salute with a high elbow. He reeked of mosquito repellent.

“Drive on,” the captain told the driver. The jeep bolted away and turned the corner. The black goat walked out to the wire, pressed his horns against the coils, and shook his head.

Problems of addition and subtraction were chalked on the blackboard inside the classroom where the platoon was billeted. The room was empty and smelled of soiled laundry and gun oil. Romero leaned out a window to see if he could spot Sergeant Dixon. Rosen was leaning against the sandbags with the goat standing by his side like a hunting dog. There was no sign of Dixon. He craned his neck to see the turquoise house. *Let Dixon find me*, he decided and lowered himself down using his rifle for support until he sat squarely on the floor with his back against the wall. His steel helmet grew heavier when he lowered his head and he considered taking it off—he slept.

A sharp kick on his foot woke him. “Get on your feet,” Sergeant Dixon said. “Are you sleeping or checking your eyelids for holes?”

“Huh?”

“Wake up. I can’t have you slumped over here in the middle of the morning like some wino,” Dixon scolded. Romero strained against his rifle and pulled himself up.

“We’ve got a job to do tomorrow. We’re going to play Santa Claus and give handouts to the natives. A truck will be here to take us to Duarte Street at ten hundred hours.” Romero rubbed his eyes in response.

CHAPTER TWO

An orderly crowd of Dominicans milled around the dirty street. Many of them carried cooking pots. Some held large tin containers, while others gripped galvanized buckets. A drone of Spanish buzzed around them. The smell of charred timbers from a burned out storefront fouled the air.

“All right—listen up,” Sergeant Dixon said to Romero. “Tell these people to form two lines behind the truck. I want women and children in one line and the men in the other.”

Romero faced the crowd and shouted the instructions. Some shuffled, some stood where they were. An old man cupped his ear, and a baby cried. He repeated the orders, and they split up into two lines.

“Slow moving mothers,” Dixon muttered. “They could move with a little more snap.”

The lines were formed, and the men from the support platoon doled out the rations. It went slowly at first, but a rhythm was established, and things moved well. It didn’t last long.

“Romero, over here *now*,” Dixon roared.

“What is it?”

“You better tell our girlfriend to get that guy she’s with into the other line,” Sergeant Dixon said, flicking his finger to point her out.

Near the end of the line was Romero’s *Contessa*. She stood behind a young man in a wheelchair.

“So what’s wrong?”

“You better tell Miss Santo Domingo to get that guy in the men’s line—he’s no kid.”

“But the guy’s in a wheelchair—a cripple.”

“I don’t care. My orders are to have the men in one line and women and children in the other. I didn’t get any specifics for invalids.”

“I don’t think it’s any big deal.”

“You just tell her,” he paused, took a breath and lowered his voice. “...tell her in a nice way to get that cripple’s greasy ass into the other line.”

Romero stepped toward his *Contessa*. Dixon was right behind him, puffing on his sweat-soaked back. “Good afternoon,” he said to her. “My sergeant has orders that all men must be in the other line.”

“He’s my brother,” she said and stepped forward as the line moved up. Her hands rested lightly on the back of the wheelchair. Her forehead was dry, and the sun flared off the sheen of her black hair.

“What’d she say?” Dixon demanded.

“The guy in the wheelchair is her brother.”

“I don’t give a ding-dong flying fig *who* he is. I want him in the other line.”

“I’m sorry, but your brother must get in the other line with the men.” He looked at her hands, no rings or shadows. There were no visible warts and all her even teeth were intact. There had to be some flaw that was overshadowed by her beauty, and Romero thought he had discovered it in the length of her neck—a bit too long, but then he noticed how it moved her head with a strong, graceful dignity.

“I’m not going to let you separate us,” she said, standing erect. The young man in the wheelchair kept his head bowed with the bill of his cap pulled down over his eyes.

“What’s she saying?” Dixon said, stepping between the beauty and Romero.

“She’s afraid to leave her brother.”

“Men in one line,” he said, and slammed his hand on Romero’s helmet as his face grew red, “women and children in the other line. Get that through her cement head. Tell her if she can’t get with the program, she

can go back home and starve.” He made an about face and stomped back to the truck.

“*Señorita*,” Romero said, and his jaw tightened. “Would you permit me to escort your brother to the other line? I’ll stay with him.” He lost confidence in his Spanish and was worried that he’d misspoken.

She looked down at her brother. “Do you want to go with the North American?” Romero relaxed when he saw the boy nod in agreement.

“Yes,” her brother said. “I’m sure it will be all right.”

“All we are trying to do is get everybody fed,” Romero said to her.

“You have to feed us,” she said, giving him a regal glance. “You’re our jailers.”

“It’s all right, Ramona,” her brother said. “I’ll go with the soldier.”

She took off his baseball cap and kissed the top of his head. That’s when Romero first saw her look of love. The gaze reminded him of the way his mother had looked when she watched his brother play the violin.

She turned the wheelchair around and offered Romero the handles. He started to push the chair towards the front of the line before changing his mind. He wheeled the chair to the rear to give himself time to ask the boy about his sister. A group of tough-looking young men shuffled in line ahead of them. They took their food with a smirk before swaggering away. Had any of them ever taken shots at him, or Lieutenant Stiller?

“What’s your name?” Romero asked the brother.

“Orlando,” he said and smiled.

“Why,” Romero asked, “are you wearing a New York Yankees cap? I thought Dominicans were Giant fans.”

“We are. I have a cousin who was signed by the Giants before his contract was bought by the Yankees.”

“Your cousin is a baseball player?”

“He played at Richmond until he hurt his arm and had to quit.” His smile grew wider, and Romero wondered if it was because he found his Spanish amusing.

Romero wanted to tell the boy he was signed by the Cubs for a small bonus and made it to Double A at San Antonio before he was released. Sergeant Dixon was busy in front of the line, waving his arms to keep the Dominicans moving. His face twisted up when he noticed Romero in line with the brother, and Romero's grip tightened on the wheelchair as the sergeant blitzed toward him.

"What the hell are you doing in line?"

"I thought this would be a good way to settle the situation before there was any trouble."

"Trouble?" He pushed a Dominican out of his way and continued to rush toward Romero. "The only trouble you have to worry about is the kind you'll get from me if you don't start following instructions."

Romero didn't want his *Contessa* to think he was intimidated. He'd make a stand. "Stop the hard-ass bullshit," he said and wondered if his words had enough spine to them.

"I got you by the shorts until you get off this island," Dixon threatened, shaking a finger in Romero's face. "This ain't no time to overload your canary ass with your alligator mouth."

Romero felt a breeze as Dixon's wagging finger stirred the air. He released the grip he had on the wheelchair, and his fists clenched. Over Dixon's shoulder a jeep was coming towards him. Captain Lunt.

The driver slowed the vehicle and honked to open a hole in the women's line. The jeep wedged through and crept to a stop next to Sergeant Dixon.

Captain Lunt lifted his goggles off his face and stuck them on his helmet above the rim. It was his Rommel look. The driver kept his goggles in place while he chewed gum. He looked like a feeding insect as he stared past the folded down windshield that was covered in burlap. Dixon's eyes swiveled toward the jeep.

"How's the detail going?" Captain Lunt said to Sergeant Dixon.

"Just fine, sir," Dixon said; he did not salute. Captain Lunt looked at Romero, who straightened his back.

"That looks good Sergeant," the captain said.

“Sir?” Dixon said.

“The picture of Romero behind the wheelchair.” The captain put his hands to his face and framed a photo with an imaginary camera. “Click,” he said. “I can see the caption now: ‘American paratrooper assists handicapped Dominican.’”

“Yes sir,” Dixon said. “It would be a nice picture.” He turned and curled his lip at Romero.

“All right, driver,” the captain said. “See if you can get us back to the CP and not run over too many Dominicans.” The jeep drove off.

Sergeant Dixon looked up into the cloudless sky. “Is that why we’re down here,” he asked of a higher power, “to pose for pictures?” He turned to Romero, “Do you know what you’ve got, Romero?”

“What?”

“Dumb luck, that’s what you’ve got. That’s better than having brains or good looks.” He took the wheelchair from Romero before pushing it to the front of the line.

Two Dominican men arrived late. They talked briefly with the *Contessa* just as she was leaving. When they got into the men’s line, Romero recognized them as Rosen’s “hecklers.”

* * * *

The next morning Dixon had Romero go out to the sandbags and relieve Rosen. His *Contessa* was already in her chair. Rosen was trying to get her attention by calling out in a Bogart voice.

“Here’s looking at you kid, and you’re looking pretty good.” The *Contessa* didn’t even look up.

“Do you think you’re some kind of a comedian?” Romero said as he got behind the sandbags.

“Yes I was, and I was making a living at it before the draft blew me off the stage and into the Army.” Rosen paused and looked at Romero. Romero

didn't say anything. "Maybe I can get her with my John Wayne." He stuck his chest out towards Romero's *Contessa*. "I used to breed horses until I found out that they could do that themselves."

"Hey, that's pretty good," Romero said to Rosen, while he watched his *Contessa* ignore him.

"I told you I was a stand-up comic."

"I thought you were bullshitting me. Where did you perform?"

"I started working taverns before I was old enough to drink. Then I got booked at clubs in the Village like the Café Rafio and the Café Wha."

"I've never been to those places."

"How about the Village Gate or the Blue Angel, I've played them too."

"I never heard of them either."

"Have you ever been to New York?"

"No I haven't," Romero said. He tried to see through the glare of the sun if his *Contessa* was wearing nylons.

"That's why— I'd probably be wasting my breath if I told you I was one of the first comics to take the stage at the Improvisation on West 44th. Where are you from, anyway?"

"First Texas, then Chicago."

"Ever hear of Mr. Kelly's?"

"Is it on Rush Street?"

"Yes it is."

"I never heard of it."

"If I ever need a partner for my act, I'll let you know."

"I think her legs are bare," Romero mumbled.

"What?"

"I don't think she's wearing any nylons."

"Neither am I, so what?"

"On a scale of one to ten, she has to be a ten if there ever was one," Romero said, having lost interest with Rosen tooting his own horn.

"I've seen better," Rosen said. "I once knew an eleven." Old newspapers

blew down the street like tumbleweed before some were snared in the coils of the wire.

“How can there be an eleven?”

“That’s when you find a ten who owns a liquor store.”

Romero thought what he said was funny, but he didn’t compliment him with a laugh. “I bet you stand out here and instead of keeping an eye out for trouble you’re thinking up new jokes.”

“I have to keep my act up, so I can pick up my career when I get out of the Army.”

“If you were a comedian in civilian life, why didn’t you try to get into the Army Special Services?”

“I tried, but they only wanted singers, dancers, and horn blowers. They didn’t have any interest when it came to comedians.”

“So why did you join the paratroopers?”

“Maybe I thought there’d be some laughs in it. I don’t know. When I was a kid, I saw a Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis movie about paratroopers called *Jumping Jacks*. I thought the gags were funny. Maybe that had something to do with it.”

“Well, you can go now and get breakfast if you want.”

“No, thanks,” Rosen said shaking his head. “I can’t cut another spoonful of watery powered eggs. I’ll just hang around out here and enjoy the street scene. Besides, if I go back into the compound, I’ll probably run into Sergeant Dixon, and he’ll find some shit detail for me.”

“You’re on his shit list for some reason.”

“He doesn’t like my hillbilly jokes.”

Romero was glad he stayed. He was starting to enjoy the way Rosen talked. His words had that comical Brooklyn bounce to them. At first he thought Rosen might’ve been bullshitting him about being a standup comic, but the more he listened to him, the more he could see how he could’ve made a living at it. He was hoping Rosen could get his *Contessa’s* attention with his antics.

Rosen tried talking to her in a Jimmy Stewart voice with no results. “There’s a talent some babes have,” he said, turning back to face Romero. “Something about the way they can ignore you. They work it out in such a way that you become more interested in them.” The tone of his voice shifted inward like he was talking to himself. “Maybe that was what Bella was trying to do.”

“Who’s Bella?”

“A girl I was in high school with. That Dominican chick across the street there reminds me of her.”

“How’s that?” Romero wanted him to describe her while he watched the *Contessa*.

“Bella Holtzman was her name. She was the Homecoming Queen at our junior prom. She didn’t give the impression, at least back then, that she was something special, like some of the good lookers do. If you passed her in the hall, she’d make a point of it to say hello.

“She had this little bump on the ridge of her nose. If she looked at you from a certain angle, she looked a little cockeyed. The thing was—nobody cared! If anything, it added to her magic.”

“You liked her, right?”

“Liked her? I was nuts about her, along with every other Sol, Nate, and Ira.”

“Who?”

“And Tom, Dick, and Harry too. Anyway,” Rosen continued, as Romero’s *Contessa* arched her back for an instant. “I didn’t see her the whole summer between our junior and senior year. When I saw her in school that September, she had changed. She’d walk right past me. I said hello to her in the cafeteria, and she looked at me like I was a dead rat.”

“Did you ever find out what changed her?”

“I heard she’d gotten cosmetic surgery on her nose over the summer, but I couldn’t see what difference it made. I couldn’t get her attention, and it really frustrated my ass.”

“So she became conceited?” Romero said, but thought his *Contessa* wasn’t conceited. That would’ve left him cold; looking at her had the opposite effect.

She had this look that said something else: *I can be had, if you play your cards right, but first you have to have the right cards to play.*

“Did Bella become conceited? Let me tell you something,” Rosen said. “She could knock herself up by looking in the mirror. One day I saw her in the hall between classes, and I ambushed her with a stupid song that I got out of a *Mad Magazine*:

She got a nose job,
She got a nose job.
Now she’s got the
Prettiest schnozz in town.”

Romero’s *Contessa* looked up from her book before Rosen finished the last line of his little ditty. She looked towards them but not directly, as if in her mind’s eye she was taking a snap shot of the school behind them, and Rosen and Romero just happened to be in the picture.

“The song got a lot of laughs, and the gag caught on. Just about every time she walked down the hall some guy would hound her with that song.”

“What did she do?”

“She just kept walking. Sometimes she’d turn around and yell, ‘GROW UP.’ She was a cinch to become the Senior Homecoming Queen, but a lot of kids soured on her because she became so high and mighty. Another girl got elected who wasn’t nearly as good looking as her.”

Rosen stopped talking, and his chest heaved as he took a deep breath and flashed an artificial grin. His eyes told Romero that he had touched a nerve that he didn’t realize he had.

“Maybe she’ll dig my Cagney,” he said through his planted smile.

“I can see she’s on the edge of her seat just waiting for it.”

Rosen stepped out from the sandbags and started singing *Yankee Doodle*. Romero’s *Contessa* was folding up her chair before he finished the first verse.

Romero had no chance to warn him. Between watching his *Contessa* and taking in Rosen’s act, Romero hadn’t noticed the first sergeant approaching

the sandbags. The top-kick stood at parade rest and rose up slightly on his toes in a no nonsense posture as he watched Rosen finish his performance.

First Sergeant Hudson always looked crisp. His fatigues fit him as if crafted by an English tailor. He wore a leather shoulder holster for his pistol. And it wasn't an army issue .45. He packed a .38 revolver. Romero wondered how he was allowed to buck army uniformity and field his own personal weapon, but he never had enough hair to ask him. The first sergeant's presence would pull rank on a general. He was known throughout the division as Mr. Airborne.

Rosen completed his act just as the *Contessa* entered her house and closed the door behind her. When he turned back around, his nose almost brushed against the first sergeant's shoulder.

"Okay, clown, you're not on some night club stage here. If you'd keep your eyes opened as wide as your mouth, we all might be a little safer."

"I was just trying to provide a little good will entertainment for the locals," Rosen said to the first sergeant, losing his Cagney voice.

"If they want entertainment, they can go see Bob Hope when he comes here next week, at least he's funny."

"Yes, First Sergeant."

"Which one of you is on guard here?"

"I am, First Sergeant," Romero said, and he wondered if the top kick would start ripping on him.

First Sergeant Hudson turned toward Romero and exposed the scar tissue that covered the left side of his face. When he looked his way, Romero felt like he had lost his boots and was standing in the street in his bare feet. He braced himself.

"You're lucky you're a short-timer," the first sergeant said, "so you don't have to listen to his bullshit act for much longer."

"Yes, First Sergeant. It's one of the blessings that I count every night."

The first sergeant gave Romero a slight nod and a thoughtful smile before looking across the wire at the turquoise house. "Have you ever talked to that dream girl that lives over there?"

“No I haven’t, First Sergeant,” Romero said. He was puzzled by how fast he gave into the impulse to be deceitful.

“She’s got everybody in the company dangling by their dick strings,” First Sergeant Hudson said, smiling again. But most of his disfigured face remained rigid, like a jack-o’-lantern’s grin. He turned around and walked back to the courtyard in long measured strides.

“He must like you,” Rosen said to Romero. “That’s the first time I ever saw First Sergeant Godzilla smile, if you can call it that. That guy looks a little bit like every wanted poster I ever saw. I bet when snakes get drunk, they see him.”

“No,” Romero said. “I don’t think he likes me anymore than he does anyone else. I think seeing that Dominican beauty just put him in a good mood.”

“Since he was in such a good mood, why didn’t you ask him if he knew when you’re getting sent back to Bragg?”

Rosen was right, Romero thought, he should’ve asked. He didn’t have an answer other than he didn’t want to sound like a whiner. The two Dominican “hecklers” waved from the rooftop and patted their bellies.