

THE BURNING HOURS

When the flower of youth perishes

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*They were young, the pretty girls
and the handsome boys,
Distant thunder faint in their ears,
They danced and laughed away
the burning hours of their youth,
Then, thunder roared,
And, like a flickering flame,
gaiety died in the wind of war*

Lawrence V. Stefanile
April 2015

**The Ardennes Forest, Belgium
Christmas Day, 1944**

Vince Farro blew warm breath onto his trigger finger and slid it back into his glove. His wet feet felt like two blocks of ice. He peered through a wool mask under his helmet, his breath hanging like a gray cloud before dissipating into the icy air. Vince swung his rifle to eerie sounds, whistling through the snow-choked forest before him.

Small arms fire erupted and then stopped leaving the night ghostly still.

“Somebody got it,” he thought, dismissing the incident from his mind.

“The guys that daydream don’t wake up,” Vince recalled Sergeant Carroll Darling’s warning in his thick Alabama drawl.

“There’s one thing that might keep you all alive,” Darling began, “we all liked Jimmy Wilson, but Jimmy’s dead, one too many daydreams about his wife and kids and his farm in Idaho. Last night a Kraut infiltrator shoved his bayonet through Jimmy’s heart because Jimmy wasn’t paying attention. What I’m telling you jokers is you got to stay alert. You married guys this isn’t the time to be thinking of your wives and kids. The rest of you clowns forget about your girlfriends inviting you into paradise. Damn it! Stay alert! It’s all you need to know and maybe you will get out of here alive.”

“I might be dead tonight,” Vince thought. “At least, the guys that got killed when lost in their dreams died with sweet memories. Maybe, they’re the lucky ones. I’m living like a trapped rat in a frozen hole in the ground.”

The chatter of machine gun fire opened up, crackling through the night and then it stopped.

“No guarantees I’ll get out of here alive,” Vince murmured.

Machine gun fire started up, longer, more intense bursts, and then nothing. The snow swept landscape was again soundless.

Vince fired bursts into dancing shadows in the forest, their echoes disappearing into the night. He needed to dispel the fear that clung to him like the frozen wool mask on his face. He knew his only escape home was in his mental imagery. If he had no tomorrows, then Vince wanted to spend his mortal hours with the person he most desired. Vince closed his eyes, lifted his face to the falling snow and dreamed of Linda Conover.

**Jersey City, New Jersey
Autumn, 1942**

Linda Conover, an elegant young woman whose rich chestnut hair matched her warm brown eyes commanded the sunlit room that looked beyond the Hudson River to the New York Skyline. Her soft smile and unaffected personality endeared her to all who knew her. Vince was bowled over the first time he saw Linda. His eyes traced her every move as she came to him, her hips tossing ever so slightly, the scent of her perfume in his nostrils, her delicate hand extended in greeting.

“Hello, I’m Linda Conover.”

“I’m Vincent Farro,” Vince shook her hand.

“Hello, Vincent Farro,” Linda smiled.

“I was just passing by,” Vince explained.

“You’re here now, please come in.”

“No thanks I have to go.”

“I won’t force you.”

“Is this your party?”

“Yes, we’re celebrating my appointment.”

“Congratulations.”

“This is my husband, Derek,” Linda said.

Neatly turned out in his Army uniform Derek exuded an air of self-importance. He sipped a beverage of unknown origin glancing everywhere in the room, but seldom resting his eyes on Linda, the way lovers’ transmit intimate signals.

“You have guests,” Derek pulled Linda’s arm brusquely a conqueror’s grin crossed his mouth.

“It was a pleasure meeting you,” Linda smiled.

Vince nodded and watched her walk away.

Jersey City, New Jersey
January 1924

Vince Farro and Domenico “Tommy” Tomasso from their earliest days were inseparable. They lived next door to one another in the Italian section of Jersey City. Their births, two hours apart, in 1924 were legendary in their neighborhood. Now they shared a foxhole on a ridge in Belgium shooting at Germans who were trying to kill them.

The day in January was clear and cold. Julia Tomasso and Regina Farro commiserated over their visibly pregnant conditions. They moistened their lips with licorice tasting Anisette trying to forget their discomfort.

Julia’s fiery personality was matched by her coal dark eyes and her razor sharp tongue. Conversely, Regina was reserved; of medium height, she had warm brown eyes and long black hair that cascaded over her shoulders and onto her bosom.

“We look like we swallowed beach balls,” Julia laughed.

Regina nodded agreement, shifting into a more comfortable position.

“Wow! He’s kicking like a soccer player. This kid wants out,” Julia said, her breathing labored. “How are you, Regina?”

“A little better than you, I think,” answered Regina, shifting back and forth in her chair. “You never heard from Cologero?”

“My mother warned me not to marry him. *Buona a nulla truffatore!* Good-for-Nothing crook, a bum, she yelled at me. I didn’t tell you, Regina,” Julia’s voice grew somber between rapid bursts of breathing. “My mother prayed to the saints to stop the marriage. She wanted to slap me, to bring me to my senses. Instead, she bit her hand to keep from hitting me. I should have listened to her. Cologero thought I was pregnant

with his baby. That didn't stop the little man with big plans. He took off faster than an Olympic sprinter. I never heard from him."

"She bit her hand to take your pain, Julia," Regina grimaced at her own pain, "Oh, God!" she exclaimed, placing her hand on her bloated stomach.

"Should I call? Should I call?" Julia repeated.

"He's calming, now!"

"How do you know you have a boy in there, Regina?"

"His name will be Vincent for my Vincenzo."

"I got a boy in here," Julia ran her hand over her protuberant belly, "Today is Sunday, Regina. I'll name my son Domenico, Sunday, the day of his birth.

"Julia! I have to get to the hospital!"

"Okay!" Julia knocked the candlestick phone off the kitchen table. It tumbled to the floor, out of her reach.

"I can't get it! It's too far from me! Regina, I can't reach it!"

"Pull it up by the wire!" screamed Regina. "Hurry, Julia, or I'll deliver on your kitchen floor!"

Julia tugged on the wire.

"It's like catching a fish at the shore," she laughed, pulling the phone to her.

"It's not funny, Julia. Get help!"

Julia dialed the phone her eyes tracing the agonizingly slow rotation of the disk.

"Blessed Jesus," I'm exploding!" exclaimed Julia.

"Sergeant Dugan speaking."

"Put Captain O'Malley on the phone!" Julia demanded.

"Who is calling Captain O'Malley?"

"Julia Tomasso! Tell him Julia Tomasso!"

"Captain! Some Italian dame wants to talk to you."

"What's her name?"

"Julie Tomato or something like that."

"Tomasso! You Idiot, Tomasso!" Captain O'Malley ripped the phone from Dugan's hand.

“Scram, Dugan!” This is a personal call.

“Where should I go, Captain?”

“Walk the beat, feed the horses, just get out of here.”

“Shamus! Come! Now!” Julia screamed into the phone.

“Are you ready?”

Julia’s undulating contractions rolled together, without let-up.

“What’s that noise, Julia?”

“It’s Regina! She’s ready, too! Hurry!” Julia doubled over in pain.

“What! Two of you! You think this is an ambulance service, Julia? What’ll the boys think? The Precinct Captain taking two pregnant women to the hospital! These guys gossip like little girls. Word’ll get to the Commissioner. Then, I’m ruined, Julia.”

“I’m going to...,” Julia choked. “I’m going to have your son!” She screamed into the phone. “On my kitchen floor if you don’t get here, and soon!” Julia shrieked, breathing rapidly, heavily, in and out. “And, you’re worried about your career!? Is that what you want, Shamus? Is that what you want? Do you want your son born on my kitchen floor?”

Regina slid to the cold floor. She rolled onto her back. Her pelvis grew heavier. Her contractions came closer. Julia stretched obliquely in her chair, the phone receiver in her ear.

“Get here! Now! You dumb Paddy!”

“Control your temper,” Shamus said, tauntingly.

“Control my temper!” Julia screamed into the phone. “I’ll go to the newspapers! I’ll call the mayor! If I have to I’ll call the Pope!”

“I’ll be there right away,” Shamus promised, and hung up the phone.

“Are you all right, Regina?”

“I’m okay, I think. You okay?”

“We’re okay, Regina,” Julia said, her voice swallowed in unrelenting pain.

**The Ardennes Forest, Belgium
Christmas Day, 1944**

Tommy Tomasso's brain struggled to keep his body alert. His only sensation was a progressive perception of discomfort. As he and the men on the ridge knew death would come from the forest. He wanted to light a cigarette to experience the warmth of a flaming match and settle his nerves, but it was a dead give-away to German snipers. Tommy's heart beat like a clock ticking away the minutes to his oblivion.

"What's that?" Vince whispered.

"I don't know," Tommy tightened his rifle's trigger.

"Sounds like a bird."

"Can't be, not in this snow," responded Tommy.

"Flowers grow in the snow."

"You're nuts, Vince, where?"

"In the Alps."

"No kidding."

"It's true, Tommy."

"How many books have you've read, Vince?"

"I don't know."

"It is a bird! Listen, Tommy!"

"You're right," Tommy relaxed his trigger finger. "Do you think he's cold?"

"Maybe, he's lost; I guess he's cold."

"Lost and freezing! Like us, but, the bird can fly away, Vince."

Flares zoomed skyward followed by heavy machine gun fire.

"Germans tripped the wire," Vince observed.

Machine gun fire continued heavy and then it stopped and the eerie green flare died in the sky. For a short time it was quiet, then, machine gun fire erupted, again.

“They’re raking the field.”

“Lots of dead Germans,” Tommy mourned.

The machine gun fire stopped. Only pelting snow was audible.

“What are you thinking, Vince?”

“Christmas at home, Bing Crosby singing White Christmas.”

“The Germans call Crosby *Der Bingel*,” Tommy said.

“Where did you hear that?”

“I heard some of the guys talking.”

“If *Der Bingel* came here he wouldn’t have to dream about a white Christmas,” Vince said, ruefully.

“Plenty of snow here to make his dream come true,” Tommy laughed.

“Can’t hear the bird,” Vince whispered.

“Yeah!” Tommy chimed in, “flew away, smart bird.”

“Wish we could fly away.”

“I’m with you, Vince.”

Tommy and Vince lapsed into silence watching for enemy movements, listening for strange sounds.

Then Tommy felt a jab to his ribs.

"Next month, we'll be legal," Vince said.

"What do you mean?"

"Twenty-one, Tommy, we'll be able sit at a bar and order drinks."

"When we get home, let's go to Lisa's Tavern and get loaded."

"It's a deal."

"Kurt Schaeffer got killed," Tommy said, after a brief pause.

"I heard he got hit at Anzio after knocking out two machine gun nests."

"Kurt had it all, Football All-America, college scholarships, he didn't have to be in this war, Tommy," Vince lamented.

"Remember when Mr. Birkman took attendance in English class," Tommy reminisced. "I detect a hickory aroma from Schaeffer's German Pork Store, he'd say. Where are you, Kurt?"

"Right here, Kurt laughed and stood up, all 6'5" of him," Tommy said.

"Tell your dad to save me two knockwursts. You may take your seat, Mr. Schaeffer, he'd say." Vince smiled at the memory of Kurt's and Samuel Birkman's attendance ritual.

"How about Brady measuring javelin throws at the track and field meet? Kurt warned he was too close, but Brady didn't move. I still see that javelin sailing through the sky and Brady running around trying to avoid it," Tommy laughed, loudly.

"Shut up! Tommy!"

"Sorry," Tommy whispered. "A little higher and Brady would be talking like a soprano."

"Six more inches Kurt, you yelled, and you would have speared him like a fish! Everybody in the stands clapped and you had to stand up and bow."

“Brady ran us around the hot gym because you shot off your mouth, Tommy,” Vince paused, “Kurt could have gone to college or played for the New York Giants. He enlisted to prove he was a patriotic American. He didn’t live to see his twentieth birthday.”

Kurt Schaeffer’s death was a reality neither Vince nor Tommy wanted to accept. Soon the snow-caked landscape would be stained red their youthful memories stolen by the drumbeat of war. In those brief moments of remembering Kurt Schaeffer and Samuel Birkman, Vince and Tommy forgot how cold they were.

**Grayson County, Texas
Spring 1899**

Enoch Darling, a circuit preacher in the fifth decade of life felt the swaying of his trusted horse Bathsheba beneath him. He traveled the roads of Grayson County, Texas searching for souls to save. The rhythmic swaying of Bathsheba inflamed Enoch's carnal desires. Fearing the loss of his soul he dismounted and fell to his knees. He implored the Almighty to deliver him from the lustful temptations that had captured his body and soul. Enoch waited, but no responses to his supplications came.

"Why have you abandoned your faithful servant?" he demanded.

Again, he heard only the menacing wind in the black woods.

"I am unfit to dwell in your House, Lord! Satan has snared me!" Enoch lamented.

Again, only eerie winds filled his ears. He mounted Bathsheba and galloped fast to Skitty Street. Enoch lashed Bathsheba furiously straight to the Pleasure Palace Social Club where he had prayed with fallen men and women. He jumped off Bathsheba and dashed through a row of statues of satyrs and naked women, feverishly banging a large brass ring until the front door swung open.

Inside the color red dominated the parlor where women lounged seductively on recliners awaiting the attention of palace patrons. Enoch ran to a room at the top of the dimly lit hallway and pushed its door open.

Lulu McCallister, nubile, no more than sixteen and smiling angelically, stood at her bedside. Beads of sweat glistened on Enoch's face, his eyes burned hot with desire. He picked Lulu up like a feather in his sweaty grip and pinned her shoulders to the bed, and then a voice thundered

in his head, “Why didn’t you wait for me?” it roared. Enoch rolled off Lulu and felt his flesh cooling.

“Get out of this house of iniquity!” the voice boomed, “Go and spread the good word!”

Enoch dragged Lulu down the stairs, out of the building. He mounted Bathsheba and pulled her up, behind him. The Madam’s shotgun blast peppered Bathsheba; she reared up and spilled Lulu to the ground, Enoch pulled her back up and they galloped away into the night.

One year later, their son was born. Enoch baptized him Carroll, *a war champion for the Almighty*. In the passing years they traveled the back roads of Texas, winding up in Alabama. Enoch preached the Bible, Lulu sang hymns and Carroll passed the hat. When Carroll was seventeen Enoch handed him a silver dollar and told him to find his way. Carroll never saw Enoch and Lulu, again.

**Fort Dix, New Jersey
Summer 1943**

Carroll Darling recalled his first meeting in 1943 at Fort Dix, New Jersey with Vince, tall and thin, unruly black hair, circumspect and thoughtful, and Tommy, Vince's opposite, shorter but more powerfully built, his red hair a match for his hell raising temperament.

Sergeant Darling joined the army after Enoch and Lulu abandoned him. He served honorably in World War I where he was wounded several times in the Argonne Forest. Now in his forties Carroll Darling knew only life in the army; he was an army lifer.

"I'm Sergeant Darling!" He growled to a line of newly inducted soldiers, mostly eighteen and nineteen year old boys.

"I'm Private Sweetie-Pie."

"Who said that?!" Darling bellowed.

Tommy stepped forward, grinning.

Darling leaned into Tommy demanding his name.

"Domenico Tomasso," Tommy answered, "My friends call me Tommy."

"I'm not your friend! Tomasso is an Eye-talian name. So you won't mind if I call you Tomasso-Paste, smart ass!"

Before Tommy could verbalize his comeback, Vince told him to shut up.

"Get back in line, Tomasso," Darling growled.

Following Darling's order Tommy executed a sloppy about-face.

"Try it, again! Tomasso-paste!" Sergeant Darling ordered.

"Yes sir," Tommy said.

"Don't call me, sir, its sergeant, got it?"

“Yes sir, I mean sergeant,” Tommy executed a neat about-face and winked at Vince.

As he dismissed the line of newly inducted soldiers, Darling laughed to himself at the redhead from New Jersey who had the temerity to defy him.

**The Ardennes Forest, Belgium
Christmas Day, 1944**

As night inched to dawn, German artillery got louder and closer. Successive blasts shook the snow laden forest amputating tree tops exploding pine needles and wood splinters into massive clouds into the gray morning. Vince and Tommy covered their ears to blot out concussive waves rolling through the forest. Hours later the artillery bombardment stopped.

“It’s starting!?” Tommy said.

“German artillery,” Vince mumbled.

“Why don’t they just come so we can get this over with?”

“Take it easy, Tommy, we all got the jitters.”

“Yeah! We all got the jitters.”

“What’s that?” Vince leveled his rifle.

“Stay where you are or I’ll blow your brains out!”

“Hold it!” Vince grabbed Tommy’s arm, “It’s Darling.”

“Ready, Vince?” Darling said, pushing through the snow to the lip of Vince’s and Tommy’s foxhole.

“Locked and loaded, Sarge,” Vince responded.

“What about me, Darling? Are you angry with me, honey?”

“Shut up! Tomasso-sauce,” Darling countered, “How’s baby?”

“She’s sleeping,” Tommy stroked his automatic weapon.

“She’ll be ready, Sarge.”

“Make sure you wake her up when the alarm goes off. Scuttlebutt says the Krauts are coming through our left flank, probably through your position.”

“You okay, Vince?”

“I’m good, Sarge.”

“Tommy?”

“Yeah, Sarge, hey, Sarge.” Tommy called.

“What!” Darling answered.

“Nothing. Thanks.”

“Good luck,” Darling crawled through the snow toward the tree line.

“Sleet’s letting up,” Vince observed.

“Darling’s a good man,” Tommy said.

“The best,” Vince agreed.

“If it wasn’t for the wool socks your mother knitted for us, we’d have frost bite, like lots of the guys.”

“I got the second pair in my pack.”

“I’m wearing both pairs.”

“Yeah,” was the only comment Vince could muster.

“Who’s the dame you’re always dreaming about, Vince?”

“She’s no dame, Tommy, she’s a lady.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I know you didn’t, Tommy.”

“Do I know her?”

“Yeah, you know her.”

“Why won’t you tell me?”

“Later.”

“We’re gonna be best men at our weddings, right, Vince?”

“Right, Tommy.”

“So – who’s the mystery woman?”

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“It’s kinda complicated.”

“I need to understand. We’re in church on your wedding day. I’m standing with you. The priest says anyone against this marriage speak now or something like that. No one comes forward because your bride is a mystery.”

“Stop breaking my chops, Tommy.”

“You know the first thing I’m gonna do when this is over, Vince?”

“You told me a thousand times.”

“Marry Rosemary.”

“You only kissed her once, Tommy. How do you know she’s the right one?”

“Sometimes, you just know,” Tommy said reflectively.

“Yeah, sometimes you know,” Vince agreed, and then both men fell silent.

**Academy for Young Women
Jersey City, New Jersey 1943**

Sister Tomasina Ambrose, Director of the Academy for Young Women looked at the wall clock moving inexorably to the 3:00 pm hour. Garbed in a black habit, a rosary with an enormous crucifix dangling from her waist belt, she instilled fear into the graduating seniors waiting for the dismissal bell to sound. A large woman with a cherubic face and pink complexion, she walked the corridor glancing at the young girls who studiously avoided eye contact with the nun's soulless gray eyes.

She stopped in front of her nemesis, "Do you have cigarettes in your bag?"

"No sister."

"You realize if you are lying, you will forfeit your place in the graduation ceremony."

"Yes sister."

"You won't mind if I look in your bag."

"No sister," the young girl complied.

Sister Tomasina examined the bag and finding no cigarettes she moved on. The young girl closed her bag and smiled at her victory over the dreaded nun. Earlier, she had passed the pack of cigarettes to her boyfriend from Hill Top High School who was participating in the track and field meet at Roosevelt Park. He secreted the pack in his sneakers getting it passed Thomas Brady, the most despised teacher at Hill Top High School.

"Remain after dismissal," Sister Tomasina ordered another senior girl.

"Yes sister," the young girl complied.

The clock moved to the 3:00 pm hour and for thirty seconds the bell clanged frenetically. The girls thundered out of the school most ran to the nearby Roosevelt Park.

“Look at them,” Sister Tomasina observed, “they can’t wait to fantasize over partially clothed public school boys,” her facial expression required a response from Rosemary.

“Yes sister,” Rosemary said.

“Review your books, Rosemary,” Sister Tomasina said, “soon you will be a Novice.”

“Thank you, Sister.”

The track and field meet at Roosevelt Park ended. Hilltop High School prevailed against its competition. Kurt Schaeffer won all of his events, setting new scholastic records. For his crude remarks, Thomas Brady sentenced Tommy to twenty laps around the hot gym. When Vince defended Tommy, he got the same sentence.

“What you said about Brady was pretty bad.”

“Yeah, I know,” Tommy answered tugging at his perspiration soaked T-Shirt sticking to his chest.

“Bowing to the crowd really flipped Brady.”

“It was worth it, Vince! Think of Brady, writhing on the ground screaming for an ambulance,” Tommy laughed.

“I should know better than to stick up for you, Tommy.”

“Let’s cross now, before the traffic worsens,” Tommy said.

“What’s with you and Brady, Tommy?”

“Whatta’ ya’ mean?”

“I know he’s a guy, but he seems to have it in for you special.”

“Come on, Vince. Let’s go,” Tommy evaded answering.

Across the street from the Academy for Young Women, Vince strolled nonchalantly, deep in thought, while Tommy whirled around, burning his warehouse of energy, conjuring up his next adventure.

“So, what’s going on with you and Brady?” Vince repeated.

“It’s a long story.”

“I’ll listen.”

“Not now, Vince.”

Tommy stopped, suddenly. His eyes riveted on a girl who had exited the Academy. He grabbed Vince's arm, bringing him to an unexpected stop.

"I'll see you, later, Vince," Tommy said.

"Where are you going?" Vince hollered.

Tommy didn't answer.

He dashed into the rushing traffic to the opposite side of the street. What Tommy didn't know as he darted between screeching vehicles his life was about to forever change.

Rosemary McNulty enjoyed the prospect of a weekend away from suffocating Sister Tomasina. She cradled an armful of books against her chest, walked slowly, relishing the sun on her fair, freckled face. Tommy wove through traffic bringing several vehicles to screeching stops ignoring motorists' angry protests. When he arrived unscathed at the opposite side of the street, he jumped onto the pavement, beside Rosemary.

"Hi, I'm Tommy. I saw you from across the street," he said, out of breath.

"Go away," Rosemary didn't look up.

"What's your name?"

"I said, go away."

"Give a guy a break. I coulda' been killed running across the street."

"You shouldn't take chances, like that."

"It was worth it. That's a lot of books for a small girl, let me help you," Tommy held out his hand.

"I'm not a small girl!"

"Okay, don't get mad," Tommy smiled at the rise he got out of Rosemary.

"Don't laugh! I mean it!"

"Okay, I won't call you a small girl. I'm leaving next week for the army, won't you even look at me," Tommy beseeched.

Rosemary looked at Tommy, who was waiting, quietly hopeful.

"You are the prettiest girl, I have ever seen," Tommy said, examining the contours of Rosemary's face, her strawberry blond hair, her sky blue eyes.

"I'm sorry you have to leave," Rosemary cast her eyes downward, ignoring Tommy's compliment.

“Please talk to me. This might be my last chance to get to know you. What is your name?” Tommy pleaded.

“My name is Rosemary. I’ll pray for you,” still looking down at her books shifting in her arms.

“That’s my friend, Vince, across the street. We have the same birthday. He’s two hours older than me. He’s going to the library. Vince is always reading. He’s a smart guy. Will you pray for him, too?” Tommy felt a need to tell Rosemary everything he could, as fast as he could.

“I pray for all the boys.”

“Hey! Vince!” Tommy yelled, “This is Rosemary.”

Vince stopped and turned. “Hello, Rosemary!” Vince waved from across the street.

“Isn’t she a doll?”

“You’re embarrassing me,” Rosemary’s face flushed pink.

“She sure is, Tommy! Be careful of that clown you’re talking to, Rosemary. He’ll break your heart,” Vince joked.

“Thank your friend for the compliment,” Rosemary requested.

“You can thank him, yourself,” Tommy answered.

“I won’t yell across the street, it’s not ladylike.”

“You’re actually talking to me,” Tommy said. “Vince!” Tommy yelled, “Rosemary said thanks. She would have told you herself, but she didn’t want to shout over the traffic.”

“Tell her, she’s welcome,” Vince continued walking.

It was the first time their eyes had met. Rosemary’s books fell to the pavement. Tommy bent down and picked them up. Sister Tomasina watched from the Academy’s main entrance silhouetted in black against the sunshine. Rosemary looked back, nervously and then to Tommy.

“Is something wrong?” Tommy asked, looking in Sister Tomasina’s direction.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Rosemary said, still distracted, they resumed walking along the pavement.

“Your books are about saints and nuns,” Tommy said.
“Most of the girls I know read romance novels.

“I start my candidacy to become a nun in September.”

“You’re going to be a nun?” Tommy said, incredulous at Rosemary’s revelation.

“I think so. I will work with the sisters before becoming a novice.”

“Did you always want to be a nun?”

“I grew up around the sisters. I guess it was understood I would go into the convent when I was of age.”

“Are you sure you want to be a nun?”

Rosemary looked at Tommy and smiled. “I guess so. I don’t know. Sister Tomasina is my mentor. She’s sure being a nun is right for me.”

“Was that Sister Tomasina at the front door of the school?”

“Yes.

“Where do you live?” Tommy asked his sense of dejection lifting.

“There,” Rosemary pointed to a white two-story wood frame building.

“That’s where the ...,” Tommy fumbled.

“The word you are looking for is orphanage.”

“Sorry, I didn’t know.”

“How could you know? The nuns brought me here when I was a baby, from Ireland. I never knew my mother and father.”

“I never knew my father, I guess I’m a half-orphan,” Tommy smiled.

“You’re funny,” Rosemary returned Tommy’s smile,

“Do you know where Gruber’s Drug Store is?”

“Yes.”

“Would you meet me there, tomorrow? I’ll buy you an ice cream sundae or whatever you like. I’ll dress real nice for you. I’ll be on time. What do you say?” Tommy talked non-stop.

“I don’t know,” Rosemary answered, and then she quickly agreed.

“Is noon okay?”

“Okay,” Rosemary smiled.

“I’ll see you tomorrow at Gruber’s, at noon.”

“I’ll see you then,” Rosemary responded.

“Okay, okay.” Tommy repeated, excitedly.

“Hey! Vince! Wait for me!” Tommy dashed across the street, cutting between oncoming traffic.

**Gruber's Drug Store
Jersey City, New Jersey
June 1943**

Benjamin Gruber had two loves; Minnie, his departed wife and the drug store they opened in 1900. Depressively lonely, Benjamin felt the sting of his advancing years and painful arthritis. With Minnie's passing the spark in his life had dulled, he no longer slept well and when merciful sleep came, it was fitful. At the end of each day, Benjamin switched off the lights and climbed the back steps of the store to the second floor apartment he and Minnie had shared for over two decades. He'd set two places at the dinner table and imagine Minnie sitting across from him discussing the day's activities answering questions he knew Minnie was asking. "The lean years were the best," he said aloud. "It's not the same, my darling. Age is my enemy. Standing is hard, my hands hurt all the time. It's painful to work the soda fountain and grind chemicals into the pestle," Benjamin drifted into silence. "The chemicals I mixed, in all those years, but I couldn't mix the right ones to save you," he sobbed. "It's the kids from the high school they keep me going, their energy and their laughter. This terrible war has changed everything. Benjamin didn't finish his dinner.

Gruber's Drug Store was a rectangle. On one side, the drug dispensary and laboratory, on the opposite side, an ice cream parlor with neatly spaced black slate tables and wire back chairs, and at its center, the soda fountain, its white marble counter lined with swivel chair stools, soda and syrup dispensers and a large red Coca Cola machine dominated the room. The floor to ceiling mirror behind the counter was trimmed with white lights and a Victory Ice Cream banner.

While preparing an ice cream Sundae, the door bell jingled.