Winter 1955

Never Look Back

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It was raining, and James Montgomery, Captain, United States Army, was crouched, shivering, in his slime-filled foxhole, trying to see through the darkness, trying to see the Sons of Nippon out there who wanted to kill him. His mind was detached from his exhausted body, soaring giddily upward, forming words: “Jesus Christ, what a mess; what a stinking, fouled up mess.” His mind looked way down at his body, hunched there, waiting. “Waiting’s the worst,” the old timers had always said, sitting in a warm room, drinking beer, laughing drunkenly, “but when they come, you forget all that.” He rubbed his hand over unresponding lips, feeling nothing. Something kept trying to force its way into his numbed mind, something small yet insistent, something about his being a man, something about being a child...

When he was young, he would stand on a hill overlooking the city, and with clenched fists, would mutter fiercely, “I’m going to be someone.” Jim Montgomery left his widowed mother amidst the barren stench of tenements, and when she cried, he sneered, “You were never a mother to me, you never gave me nothin’.” His mother was nobody—so he left.

Young Jim Montgomery was part of the city—he breathed with its breath of dynamos; his heart beat was the thud of the die-presses; his energy was the surge of industry, the production line, the sweep of gigantic corporate machinery, marching relentlessly across the continent—an overpowering monstrosity that sucked men into its vortex and processed them on its assembly lines, recreating man in its own image. Young Jim was a part of the city, a product of the machine, and he lived by the law of the machine—“produce, or you’re nothing; produce, or get out; produce, or die,” the machines thundered in a deafening chorus.

“I’ve got to get ahead,” Jim Montgomery said.

“Get ahead,” the machines echoed, “Produce,” they throbbed.

And Jim Montgomery did get ahead. He was as ruthless and impersonal as his Creator, the Machines. He was the upsurging line on a production chart; relentless, dehumanized, pitiless. He sold his part-
ners out, cut them down like a giant scythe, and got ahead. He played the stocks with strokes of inhuman genius, and was on his way up. He was going to be someone.

Jim Montgomery went to church every Sunday, and like a machine went through the prescribed ritual of salvation, but the roar of the machines drowned out the voice of the minister.

Then, suddenly the machines gained tempo, the industrial giant leaped into full power, America was at war. Jim Montgomery was drafted, through he tried his best to get around it; stock market manipulation wasn’t considered an essential industry.

Captain James Montgomery loved the Army. The thrill of power, of absolute authority, gripped him, and the rhythm of the machines gave way to the tempo of marching feet and the clang of tank treads. With a vast machine of flesh to manipulate at will, he became more aggressive than before, because none could contest him or stand in his way. He was the Maker, and the men had to produce. And the men despised him. The system that he was a part of made him no leader, because he had no following. He carried men ahead as inexorably as the moon pulls the oceans—he was the tide of men’s affairs. He had to get ahead, accompanied by the roar of men and their machines; that drive was a part of him, that thing that makes a man’s will indomitable—the desire for glory, to surpass all others, to get ahead. And men feared him, and looked up to him—and despised him.

Now, James Montgomery crouched, shivering, in his foxhole, afraid, with the enemy out there waiting to kill him. No glory now, no roar of machinery, just fear. He reached trembling fingers into his shirt pocket, and took out a small book, which the chaplain had given him. It was a Bible. He remembered the Chaplain’s words about fighting for a better world, where men would be free, where they wouldn’t have to bow down to anyone, where all would be equal—He looked up. “God—,” he hesitated. Then a maniacal light kindled in his eyes, and with contorted face, he cursed. He cursed the freedom and equality of man, and the niggers, and kikes, and yellow-bellies, and the cowards tied to their mother’s apron strings back home. He trembled as if in a frenzy.

“What I am, I made myself,” he muttered ferociously through bared teeth, “No one helped me—not God, or my mother, or anyone. What I’ve done, I’ve done as a man, alone, not asking for help, and not giving it—a power unto myself.” He flung the Bible into the mud and stood up. “Let’s go get those yellow-bellies!” he screamed.

And so Captain James Montgomery, credit that he was to the
great competitive system that spawned him, and the society that nurtured him, scrambled out of his hole and plunged forward. Captain Montgomery traveled exactly the length of a standard roll of ticker tape before a .30 calibre slug smashed through his spine and lodged in his left lung. He sprawled face down in the mud.

"Mother," he bubbled.

The bullet had come from behind.

... a different way ...

... so I went a different way. Well I'm coming down Seventh see, and here's this character:
He's sitting in the middle of the sidewalk and fussing with his ear-lobe and staring at the ground.
Well he looks sorta helpless and drunk see, or else I wouldn't of paid no attention.
(Down there you get all these "Bohemians," talking in circles and living like pigs.)
But this fella looks like a decent old joker—just pretty much fogged—so I ask him,
"Ya need some help mister?"—no answer. He don't even blink.
So I nudge him, "Hey Mister!"
... His eyes slither up me—real weird!—and he growls, "I am thinking." That's that: he's an odd bird!
Well I should of took off, but I didn't. Well hell, I was curious. So I ask, "What ya thinkin?"
He says, "I am thinking of death and of children." ... There's something about him ... you know?
Well I guess I was nuts, cause I plopped down beside him—right there on the sidewalk!—and told him,
"Well, death I don't go for, but Boy I like kids; So tell me, how many you got?"
He sighs, "I was thinking of death and of children, and feeling quite peaceful and hopeful.
But now you have forced me to think about you. The world, and its sidewalks, are yours."
And then he gets up and walks off! Well my God! I just tried to be friendly ...

... Pete Cooper