

# February, 1941 "... in the nature of 'a going away party'

*by David Ackley*

The long slog of the Depression, which the family has weathered pretty well, seems over, and if we haven't entirely prospered, neither have we visibly suffered like so many, even some nearby, in the rundown backways of Pearl Street and Crown Hill. The whole family, parents, children, and grand-children contained within a few mile radius in or near the city limits, you and your sisters Olive and occasionally Jeanette, still at home at 17 Columbia Avenue with your parents. Your sister Ruth and David and their eventual six offspring; your oldest brother, Eugene and Anna and their four nearly grown boys, all nearby in the city. Middle brother Harry and Dot and their three year old, David, in a newly purchased cottage just across the river in Hudson. Back from his last roaming stint with the CCC in Gilead, Maine, even restless Harry succumbing to the appeal of a steady job, a family settled in a place of their own, friends he grew up with in a place he knows—though sometimes too well for comfort.

But the great flywheel of the war has gained momentum and for Lela and Fred, this occasion, marked in a little piece in the Telegraph, in late February of 1941 as “...in the manner of a going away party...” along with the veterans of the last great European War, Eugene, and Ruth's David, have for a long time been alert to signs of the war's pull. In the country there is still reluctance but to some, especially those still marked by the last one, entry seems both fearful and inevitable.

And for you Philip, on the eve of your twenty sixth birthday and in the course of a life still lacking those ordinary things you'd aspired to—wife, children, a good steady job, your own home--still yours has been a life familiar, secure, with the freedom to travel, to hunt and fish in the company of a couple of friends, the rewards of being useful to your parents, Saturday afternoons at the movies, Sunday nights with the folks by the big walnut RCA radio , laughing at Fibber Mcgee and Molly, Fred Allen and Jack Benny. Or listening to President Roosevelt's fireside chats, assurances that the strengths of the country in ordinary people like ours were sufficient to all the threats and tests the world might contrive, so clear and calm and straightforward were his words.

And if this was called a going away party and thus the departing that implies an inevitable return—the coming back, or coming home, even better—there is also concealed the fearful thought that it also might be a farewell party. In the days to come, you'll leave for Florida on active duty with your Guard medical unit, the first of the family to be set in motion. Others in this room, including the seemingly settled, will follow, some before very long. An unsettling of a world, an end to routine, predictability, stability replaced by the new reign of uncertainty, the flywheel turning, gaining speed, and with it power enough to set a whole world in motion...

If certain events recur, forming rhymes in the family's history to be noted and marked, the large occasions of sons, husbands, fathers and grandsons going off to their country's wars are marked in bold. As well as the marks of separation and departure, perhaps showing in the deepened lines of Lela's face. In earlier photos, a sturdy woman, stocky and durable, by the thirties, she looked old and shrunken. Past and present collide in her memory of Eugene's war and her fears for him and her charged anticipation of the signs of another war that she must somehow steel herself to endure with two more ripe sons and several grandsons to see off to new battlefields and the threat of terrible wounds and brutal, untimely deaths.

How does a mother send her sons—Eugene in 1917, Philip in 1941—off to their wars? With a handshake and a terse goodbye from

his father, and tears from mother and sister, as with Eugene? Something for him to recall with bitter humor in a muddy trench? For you, it will be different, we'll make it different. Though we are not a family given to parties, this "going away party" is arranged. We gather around you in the place of honor alongside your parents, tables with snacks in the center of the room: coca cola, pots of coffee, tuna fish and chicken salad on Wonder Bread sandwiches; a white cake with yellow frosting, already sliced in wedges. Lela's renowned, crusty, deeply browned donuts, her sugar cookies, the size of little plates piled high on a platter; a pot of baked beans, redolent of salt pork and molasses, still warm from the oven.

One by one, family members approach and bend to wish you well, in an awkward ceremonious way that seems foreign to each of you, though none of you seems to know some other way to speak, all a bit sweaty in the heat of the crowded room and you with your habitual diffidence a little uncomfortable to be the center of attention, and the reason for the occasion.

Beside you your father wears his usual trace of a smile, long of frame and white-haired behind drifts of pipe smoke, Lela small and nervously rising from her chair beside him to rush into the kitchen calling Olive to help when the lemonade pitcher needs replenishing, or a fresh cake brought out before the last forlorn slice of the previous one vanishes to leave the scandal of an empty platter—as Olive rises reluctantly from her seat and clumps noisily from the room in protest for this interruption in her private thoughts. The slender, dark-haired girl Harry has married weaves through the room, among the standing clusters chasing her curly haired toddler, the newest grandchild, David, who occasionally gets raised to adult eye level by an aunt or uncle and amusedly examined, a new Ackley specimen for the collection.

There are gifts, presented in their tissue and ribboned wrappings by your sister Ruth's little girls: a flat pocket tin of Prince Albert pipe tobacco; a shaving kit of all leather, complete with a new razor, shaving mug and soap and a wood handled shaving brush; last, a new wrist watch, which you hold up for general inspection, wind,

and buckle to your wrist by its leather band. Though you've never had a wrist watch before, you find yourself covertly glancing at the hands gulping chunks of time, over and over through the remainder of the evening. (And awake that night, sleepless before departure, your last night for who knows how long, you raise it again to check the hands in the light of the streetlight that plays through your window, the measuring of this odd kind of unfamiliar time of impending separation and wondering, this lurching into the future which you sensed was not yours alone but would be felt by all.)

The gift-giving out of the way, the Stevens girls assemble with some of the other younger ones for parlor games, wives and sisters set up a table for whist. Eugene waves you outside for a smoke and you go out to stand on the frozen lawn where a few other men and boys trail behind. The men of the family: Harry, David Stevens, Eugene's four boys, three of whom are already talking of following your lead, bantering about whose choice will be most honorable, bravest or shrewdest, though all seem inclined-- as in some atavistic family return-- toward the sea. Eugene the family war chief in a fashion, looks on and listens not saying much, knowing he was like them once, his blood hot to go to war, to submit himself to that great test of manhood, and then the experience itself having burned all that away but leaving what in its place he and his fellows are unable to describe, even to one another, something nameless and complete and impossible to fix in mind, flashes, deafening sounds, stench, animal fear, and numb courage, going on without reason and inexplicably ending, what was still him in some sense, still standing.

His advice might be: keep your sox dry, your helmet on, hug the ground. What he says is: *Off to see the world, kid, like I did.* Across the Atlantic, tossing in the hold of a troop ship, to pass through as he did, a gauntlet of German U-boats. For him it was better to go, than have to stay behind worrying with the women. There's regret, even envy, because now he is behind. All three of his sons and you, his baby brother, following the old itinerary, the lucky leavers, rather than the stayer whose only part now is to try to calm his women, his wife and mother and sisters, him the one who knows how

inadequate to the case, are their fears, his part to calm, and conceal at all costs the smell of the rotting, unburied dead, the razed land.

Availing nothing else, pray, because: Why not?

Harry, now a family man, a home-owner, probably too old to have to go but with some reputation for being handy with his dukes, nicknamed among his buddies of younger days "Tiger," stirred by some emotion as he stands with these younger future warriors, including you his younger, softer, brother, feeling what: thwarted pride? Envy? The wish to escape from the monotonies of stability and fatherhood, or just the old nameless restlessness?

In one way or another, the war is coming for all of us, with you, only the first to leave, the bracing cold of this New Hampshire season, the frosted lawn of the family home crunching under your stamping feat, the smoke from your pipe curling up with the steam of your breath, wisping toward the clear night sky, riddled with stars.

At this moment it seems everything you are, everything you have been, your very self is here contained: your lifetime home, your entire family encompassing all three generations, inside and out here, smoking together, the elms you walked to school beneath, the ground underfoot, your mother's rose bushes, bare of leaves now all stems and thorns; the muted tire and trolley sounds of the city where you grew and were schooled, nearby Freebody park where we watched future major leaguers play hard by the wrought-iron fences, patchy grass overhanging maples and the rows of stones of Edgewood Cemetery where Fred had bought the family plot large enough to gather he and Lela and all his children in last rest; and only a couple of miles north, the Waterworks where for years now and to come your father has directed the provision of pure water, that essential of your city's existence. The pastures and brooks just north of that where you'd roamed, hunting and fishing. The streets and factories just south that had offered the possibility of work that would move your life toward your own home and family, the independent closeness, the settling into a desired future, just here, which seemed perpetually suspended just beyond your reach... and

here and in the tribal past reaching all the way back to Benajah Ackley and the Revolutionary battle of the Margarettta through Lela's own grandfather, Sergeant Hiram Maker in the Civil War and forward here beside you to your own older brother, Eugene, that if all this that had come before was somehow necessary to who you had become, that this moment too when, like all your war-going and sea-going forebears, and like your own father, whose leave-taking from Cutler with his young nascent family the necessary departure that enabled this ultimate settling, was now for you, perhaps, a version of that same necessity to depart, whether of debt to the country, whether to a test or some final schooling that if survived would free you from whatever in yourself had seemed to hold you in the shame of failure in manly aspirations. You are still young, and you go in hope, feeling well-prepared, advantaged even by the secure, loving, and durable tribe that has brought you here. And yet you can't help but feel a change coming not only in the world but in yourself: Who will you be when all this ends, if and when you return here?

Eugene, war chief, will have the last word, casting his cigarette into the brittle grass, grinding it out under the sole of his shoe. He grins at you as the men turn back toward the women and children behind the brightly lit windows. "Well, boys, we saved Europe's bacon once. I guess we can do it again."

You glance again at the new watch under the porch light: nearly time, the children to be put to bed and parents to follow soon among our tribe of "early to bed and early to rise," all except you to return to the ingrained habits and rhythms of daily life, here. Your time will be changed now, along with everything else in your newly directed life, even to the names of the hours which you try out in this moment for the first time: 20:10: 27 February, 1941: Army time. But it is just for a year of training, and unless something changes you'll be back here after four changes of season. Back in Nashua, back here at home, 17 Columbia Avenue, among your durable family.

