

EVERY SHAPE, EVERY SHADOW

CHAPTER THREE

The rumble of the big guns jarred Kenny awake. He hadn't had much rest, dozing in and out of troubled dream-slumber for five hours. Like everyone else in the platoon, he'd slept in his combat utilities so he wouldn't have to dress. When he'd first joined up, Kenny had thought "utilities" was a pretty odd name for combat clothing, but now it was just familiar old jargon.

Sailors brought around tin plates of warm--not hot--breakfast: reconstituted eggs, damp biscuits and mysterious lumps of something masquerading as meat. "Probably mutton," Kenny grumbled. "Sure sick of that New Zealand mutton, but hell, it's probably the best we'll get for quite awhile at that." He dug in and ate most of it.

Before long, Sergeant Plunkett said, "Git to the head an' shave, girls, in groups of four. Count off now." When it was his turn, Kenny ambled in there and managed to shave, although his hand was a little unsteady. But when he pulled out his tube of Ipana, he could hardly brush his teeth. Now his hand didn't want to obey at all.

Back at his bunk, he checked to make sure his Thomas Wolfe novel and collection of James Thurber short stories were stashed in his field pack. He and Skinny Wade were the company's "librarians."

Everybody was unusually quiet, adrift in the sea of their own thoughts. How was Dad? Kenny wondered. Will I live? Will I ever see Galesburg again? He thought about his mother and the shirts she used to make for him on her foot-powered sewing machine using patterns clipped from magazines. Depression clothes, she called them; those were tough years. How courageous she'd been during her illness. He had the feeling her soul was lingering around here somewhere, that she knew her boy was about to go into battle.

Sitting there, he noticed his right hand resting on his seabag was trembling again. He couldn't quite remember the term, but he knew that when a ship or plane reached a certain speed far beyond its design capability, it would just fly apart. Critical speed, was that it? His growing anxiety about combat, grinding doubts about his ability to be brave, the fear of being in some yellow rifleman's crosshairs--was he reaching that point?

He looked down at his hand. Still shaking.