

# Witness

## Walter Jon Williams

Author's Note: *"Witness"* is a contribution to the Wild Cards shared-world series, but it stands largely on its own. In order to understand its premise, only a few things need to be explained. An alien, known on Earth as Dr. Tachyon, developed the gene-warping wild card virus, which killed most of its victims horribly, which mutilated most of the survivors, and which, to a lucky few, granted genuine superpowers. In an alternate 1946, Jetboy, a famous World War II ace, died in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent terrorists from detonating a wild card bomb over Manhattan. The story begins only a few minutes after Jetboy's death, as viral spores begin to rain on the city.

The part of the story I didn't make up consists of the HUAC persecutions of the late --40s and '50s. A depressing feature of this story was hearing from young (and a few not-so-young) readers who assume that I invented the McCarthy Period for the purposes of this alternate-worlds story. I can only hope that this disbelief is a measure of how far we've come since the days of HUAC, that it really can't happen again, rather than an indication of the political naiveté that allowed it all to occur in the first place.

W.J.W.

\* \* \* \*

When Jetboy died I was watching a matinee of *The Jolson Story*. I wanted to see Larry Parks's performance, which everyone said was so remarkable. I studied it carefully and made mental notes.

Young actors do things like that.

The picture ended, but I was feeling comfortable and had no plans for the next few hours, and I wanted to see Larry Parks again. I watched the movie a second time. Halfway through, I fell asleep, and when I woke the titles were scrolling up. I was alone in the theater.

When I stepped into the lobby the usherettes were gone and the doors were locked. They'd run for it and forgotten to tell the projectionist. I let myself out into a bright, pleasant autumn afternoon and saw that Second Avenue was empty.

Second Avenue is never empty.

The newsstands were closed. The few cars I could see were parked. The theater marquee had been turned off. I could hear angry auto horns some distance off, and over it the rumble of high-powered airplane engines. There was a bad smell from somewhere.

New York had the eerie feeling that towns sometimes got during an air raid, deserted and waiting and nervous. I'd been in air raids during the war, usually on the receiving end, and I didn't like the feeling at all. I began walking for my apartment, just a block and a half away.

In the first hundred feet I saw what had been making the bad smell. It came from a reddish-pink puddle that looked like several gallons of oddly colored ice cream melting on the sidewalk and oozing down the gutter.

I looked closer. There were a few bones inside the puddle. A human jawbone, part of a tibia, an eye socket. They were dissolving into a light pink froth.

There were clothes beneath the puddle. An usherette's uniform. Her flashlight had rolled into the gutter and the metal parts of it were dissolving along with her bones.

My stomach turned over as adrenaline slammed into my system. I started to run.

By the time I got to my apartment I figured there had to be some kind of emergency going on, and I turned on the radio to get information. While I was waiting for the Philco to warm up I went to check the canned food in the cupboard--a couple cans of Campbell's was all I could find. My hands were shaking so much I knocked one of the cans out of the cupboard, and it rolled off the sideboard behind the icebox. I pushed against the side of the icebox to get at the can, and suddenly it seemed like there was a shift in the light and the icebox flew halfway across the room and damn near went through the wall. The pan I had underneath to catch the ice-melt slopped over onto the floor.

I got the can of soup. My hands were still trembling. I moved the icebox back, and it was light as a feather. The light kept doing weird shifts. I could pick up the box with one hand.

The radio warmed finally and I learned about the virus. People who felt sick were to report to emergency tent hospitals set up by the National Guard all over the city. There was one in Washington Square Park, near where I was living.

I didn't feel sick, but on the other hand I could juggle the icebox, which was not exactly normal behavior. I walked to Washington Square Park. There were casualties everywhere--some were just lying in the street. I couldn't look at a lot of it. It was worse than anything I'd seen in the war. I knew that as long as I was healthy and mobile the doctors would put me low on the list for treatment, and it would be days before I'd get any help, so I walked up to someone in charge, told him I used to be in the Army, and asked what I could do to help. I figured if I started to die I'd at least be near the hospital.

The doctors asked me to help set up a kitchen. People were screaming and dying and changing before the doctors' eyes, and the medics couldn't do anything about it. Feeding the casualties was all they could think to do.

I went to a National Guard deuce-and-a-half and started picking up crates of food. Each weighed about fifty pounds, and I stacked six of them on top of each other and carried them off the truck in one arm. My perception of the light kept changing in odd ways. I emptied the truck in about two minutes. Another truck had gotten bogged down in mud when it tried to cross the park, so I picked up the whole truck and carried it to where it was supposed to be, and then I unloaded it and asked the doctors if they needed me for anything else.

I had this strange glow around me. People told me that when I did one of my stunts I glowed, that a bright golden aura surrounded my body. My looking at the world through my own radiance made the light appear to change.

I didn't think much about it. The scene around me was overwhelming, and it went on for days. People were drawing the black queen or the joker, turning into monsters, dying, transforming. Martial law had slammed down on the city--it was just like wartime. After the first riots on the bridges there were no disturbances. The city had lived with blackouts and curfews and patrols for four years, and the people just slipped back into wartime patterns. The rumors were insane--a Martian attack, accidental release of poison gas, bacteria released by Nazis or by Stalin. To top it all off, several thousand people swore they saw Jetboy's ghost flying, without his plane, over the streets of Manhattan. I went on working at the hospital, moving heavy loads. That's where I met Tachyon.

He came by to deliver some experimental serum he was hoping might be able to relieve some symptoms, and at first I thought, Oh, Christ, here's some fruitbar got past the guards with a potion his Aunt Nelly

gave him. He was a weedy guy with long metallic red hair past his shoulders, and I knew it couldn't be a natural color. He dressed as if he got his clothes from a Salvation Army in the theater district, wearing a bright orange jacket like a bandleader might wear, a red Harvard sweater, a Robin Hood hat with a feather, plus-fours with argyle socks, and two-tone shoes that would have looked out of place on a pimp. He was moving from bed to bed with a tray full of hypos, observing each patient and sticking the needles in people's arms. I put down the X-ray machine I was carrying and ran to stop him before he could do any harm.

And then I noticed that the people following him included a three-star general, the National Guard bird colonel who ran the hospital, and Mr. Archibald Holmes, who was one of F.D.R.--s old crowd at Agriculture, and who I recognized right away. He'd been in charge of a big relief agency in Europe following the war, but Truman had sent him to New York as soon as the plague hit. I sidled up behind one of the nurses and asked her what was going on.

"That's a new kind of treatment," she said. "That Dr. Tack-something brought it."

"It's *his* treatment?" I asked.

"Yeah." She looked at him with a frown. "He's from another planet."

I looked at the plus-fours and Robin Hood hat. "No kidding," I said.

"No. Really. He is."

Closer up, you could see the dark circles under his weird purple eyes, the strain that showed on his face. He'd been pushing himself hard since the catastrophe, like all the doctors here--like everyone except me. I felt full of energy in spite of only getting a few hours' sleep each night.

The bird colonel from the National Guard looked at me. "Here's another case," he said. "This is Jack Braun."

Tachyon looked up at me. "Your symptoms?" he asked. He had a deep voice, a vaguely mid-European accent.

"I'm strong. I can pick up trucks. I glow gold when I do it."

He seemed excited. "A biological force field. Interesting. I'd like to examine you later. After the"--an expression of distaste crossed his face--"present crisis is over."

"Sure, Doc. Whatever you like."

He moved on to the next bed. Mr. Holmes, the relief man, didn't follow. He just stayed and watched me, fiddling with his cigarette holder.

I stuck my thumbs in my belt and tried to look useful. "Can I help you with something, Mr. Holmes?" I asked.

He seemed mildly surprised. "You know my name?" he said.

"I remember you coming to Fayette, North Dakota, back in --33," I said. "Just after the New Deal came in. You were at Agriculture then."

"A long time ago. What are you doing in New York, Mr. Braun?"

"I was an actor till the theaters shut down."

"Ah." He nodded. "We'll have the theaters running again soon. Dr. Tachyon tells us the virus isn't contagious."

"That'll ease some minds."

He glanced at the entrance to the tent. "Let's go outside and have a smoke."

"Suits me." After I followed him out I dusted off my hands and accepted a custom-blended cigarette from his silver case. He lit our cigarettes and looked at me over the match.

"After the emergency's over, I'd like to run some more tests with you," he said. "Just see what it is that you can do."

I shrugged. "Sure, Mr. Holmes," I said. "Any particular reason?"

"Maybe I can give you a job," he said. "On the world stage."

Something passed between me and the sun. I looked up, and a cold finger touched my neck.

The ghost of Jetboy was flying black against the sky, his white pilot's scarf fluttering in the wind.

\* \* \* \*

I'd grown up in North Dakota. I was born in 1924, into hard times. There was trouble with the banks, trouble with the farm surpluses that were keeping prices down. When the Depression hit, things went from bad to worse. Grain prices were so low that some farmers literally had to pay people to haul the stuff away. Farm auctions were held almost every week at the courthouse--farms worth fifty thousand dollars were selling for a few hundred. Half Main Street was boarded up.

Those were the days of the Farm Holidays, the farmers withholding grain to make the prices rise. I'd get up in the middle of the night to bring coffee and food to my father and cousins, who were patrolling the roads to make sure nobody sold grain behind their backs. If someone came by with grain, they'd seize the truck and dump it; if a cattle truck came by, they'd shoot the cattle and toss them on the roadside to rot. Some of the local bigwigs who were making a fortune buying underpriced wheat sent the American Legion to break the farm strike, carrying axe handles and wearing their little hats--and the whole district rose, gave the legionnaires the beating of their lives, and sent them scampering back to the city.

Suddenly a bunch of conservative German farmers were talking and acting like radicals. F.D.R. was the first Democrat my family ever voted for.

I was eleven years old when I first saw Archibald Holmes. He was working as a troubleshooter for Mr. Henry Wallace in the Department of Agriculture, and he came to Fayette to consult with the farmers about something or other--price control or production control, probably, or conservation, the New Deal agenda that kept our farm off the auction block. He gave a little speech on the courthouse steps on his arrival, and for some reason I didn't forget it.

He was an impressive man even then. Well-dressed, gray-haired even though he wasn't yet forty, smoked a cigarette in a holder like F.D.R. He had a Tidewater way of talking, which sounded strange to my ear, as if there was something slightly vulgar about pronouncing one's R's. Soon after his visit, things started getting better.

Years later, after I got to know him well, he was always Mr. Holmes. I never could see myself calling him by his first name.

Maybe I can trace my wanderlust to Mr. Holmes's visit. I felt there had to be something outside Fayette, something outside the North Dakota way of looking at things. The way my family saw it, I was going to get my own farm, marry a local girl, produce lots of kids, and spend my Sundays listening to the parson talk about Hell and my weekdays working in the fields for the benefit of the bank.

I resented the notion that this was all there was. I knew, perhaps only by instinct, that there was another kind of existence out there, and I wanted to get my share of it.

I grew up tall and broad-shouldered and blond, with big hands that were comfortable around a football and what my publicity agent later called "rugged good looks." I played football and played it well, dozed through school, and during the long dark winters I played in community theater and pageants. There was quite a circuit for amateur theater in both English and German, and I did both. I played mainly Victorian melodramas and historical spectacles, and I got good notices, too.

Girls liked me. I was good-looking and a regular guy and they all thought I'd be just the farmer for them. I was careful never to have anyone special. I carried rubbers in my watch pocket and tried to keep at least three or four girls in the air at once. I wasn't falling into the trap that all my elders seemed to have planned for me.

We all grew up patriotic. It was a natural thing in that part of the world: there is a strong love of country that comes with punishing climates. It wasn't anything to make a fuss over, patriotism was just there, part of everything else.

The local football team did well, and I began to see a way out of North Dakota. At the end of my senior season, I was offered a scholarship to the University of Minnesota.

I never made it. Instead, the day after graduation in May of 1942, I marched to the recruiter and volunteered for the infantry.

No big deal. Every boy in my class marched with me.

I ended up with the 5th Division in Italy, and had an awful infantryman's war. It rained all the time, there was never proper shelter, every move we made was in full view of invisible Germans sitting on the next hill with Zeiss binoculars glued to their eyes, to be followed inevitably by that horrific zooming sound of an 88 coming down. I was scared all the time, and I was a hero some of the time, but most of the time I was hiding with my mouth in the dirt while the shells came whizzing down, and after a few months of it I knew I wasn't coming back in one piece, and chances were I wasn't coming back at all. There were no tours, like in Vietnam; a rifleman just stayed on the line until the war was over, or until he died, or until he was so shot up he couldn't go back. I accepted these facts and went on with what I had to do. I got promoted to master sergeant and eventually got a Bronze Star and three Purple Hearts, but medals and promotions never meant as much to me as where the next pair of dry socks was coming from.

One of my buddies was a man named Martin Kozokowski, whose father was a minor theatrical producer in New York. One evening we were sharing a bottle of awful red wine and a cigarette--smoking was something else the Army taught me--and I mentioned my acting career back in North Dakota, and in a gush of inebriated goodwill he said, "Hell, come to New York after the war, and me and my dad will put you on the stage." It was a pointless fantasy, since at that point none of us really thought we were coming back, but it stuck, and we talked about it afterward, and by and by, as some dreams have a way of doing, it came true.

After V-E Day I went to New York and Kozokowski the elder got me a few parts while I worked an assortment of part-time jobs, all of which were easy compared to farming and the war. Theater circles were full of intense, intellectual girls who didn't wear lipstick--not wearing lipstick was supposed to be

sort of daring--and they would take you home with them if you listened to them talk about Anouilh or Pirandello or their psychoanalysis, and the best thing about them was that they didn't want to get married and make little farmers. Peacetime reflexes began to come back. North Dakota started to fade away, and after a while I began to wonder if maybe the war didn't have its consolations after all.

An illusion, of course. Because some nights I'd still wake up with the 88s whistling in my ears, terror squirming in my guts, the old wound in my calf throbbing, and I'd remember lying on my back in a shellhole with mud creeping down my neck, waiting for the morphine to hit while I looked up into the sky to see a flight of silver Thunderbolts with the sun gleaming off their stubby wings, the planes hopping the mountains with more ease than I could hop out of a jeep. And I'd remember what it was like to lie there furious with jealousy that the fighter jocks were in their untroubled sky while I bled into my field dressing and waited for morphine and plasma, and I'd think, If I ever catch one of those bastards on the ground, I'm going to make him pay for this";

\* \* \* \*

When Mr. Holmes started his tests he proved exactly how strong I was, which was stronger than anyone had ever seen, or even imagined. Provided I was braced well enough, I could lift up to forty tons. Machine-gun slugs would flatten themselves on my chest. Armor-piercing 20mm cannon shells would knock me down with their transferred energy, but I'd jump back up undamaged.

They were scared to try anything bigger than a 20mm on their tests. So was I. If I were hit with a *real* cannon, instead of just a big machine gun, I'd probably be oatmeal.

I had my limits. After a few hours of it I'd begin to get tired. I would weaken. Bullets began to hurt. I'd have to go off and rest.

Tachyon had guessed right when he talked about a biological force field. When I was in action it surrounded me like a golden halo. I didn't exactly control it--if someone shot a bullet into my back by surprise, the force field would turn on all by itself. When I started to get tired the glow would begin to fade.

I never got tired enough for it to fade entirely, not when I wanted it on. I was scared of what would happen then, and I always took care to make sure I got my rest when I needed it.

When the test results came in, Mr. Holmes called me in to his apartment on Park Avenue South. It was a big place, the entire fifth floor, but a lot of the rooms had that unused smell to them. His wife had died of pancreatic cancer back in --40, and since then he'd given up most of his social life. His daughter was off at school.

Mr. Holmes gave me a drink and a cigarette and asked me what I thought about fascism, and what I thought I could do about it. I remembered all those stiff-necked SS officers and Luftwaffe paratroops and considered what I could do about them now that I was the strongest thing on the planet.

"I imagine that now I'd make a pretty good soldier," I said.

He gave me a thin smile. "Would you *like* to be a soldier again, Mr. Braun?"

I saw right away what he was driving at. There was an emergency going on. Evil lived in the world. It was possible I could do something about it. And here was a man who had sat at the right hand of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who in turn sat at the right hand of God, as far as I was concerned, and he was *asking* me to do something about it.

Of *course* I volunteered. It probably took me all of three seconds.

Mr. Holmes shook my hand. Then he asked me another question. "How do you feel about working with a colored man?"

I shrugged.

He smiled. "Good," he said. "In that case, I'll have to introduce you to Jetboy's ghost."

I must have stared. His smile broadened. "Actually, his name is Earl Sanderson. He's quite a fellow."

Oddly enough, I knew the name. "The Sanderson who used to play ball for Rutgers? Hell of an athlete."

Mr. Holmes seemed startled. Maybe he didn't follow sports. "Oh," he said. "I think you'll find he's a little more than that."

\* \* \* \*

Earl Sanderson, Jr., was born into a life far different from mine, in Harlem, New York City. He was eleven years older than I, and maybe I never caught up to him.

Earl, Sr., was a railway car porter, a smart man, self-educated, an admirer of Frederick Douglass and Du Bois. He was a charter member of the Niagara Movement--which became the NAACP--and later of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. A tough, smart man, thoroughly at home in the combusive Harlem of the time.

Earl, Jr., was a brilliant youth, and his father urged him not to waste it. In high school he was outstanding as a scholar and athlete, and when he followed Paul Robeson's footsteps to Rutgers in 1930 he had his choice of scholarships.

Two years into college, he joined the Communist party. When I knew him later, he made it sound like the only reasonable choice.

"The Depression was only getting worse," he told me. "The cops were shooting union organizers all over the country, and white people were finding out what it was like to be as poor as the colored. All we got out of Russia at the time were pictures of factories working at full capacity, and here in the States the factories were closed and the workers were starving. I thought it was only a matter of time before the revolution. The CP were the only people working for the unions who were also working for equality. They had a slogan, --Black and white, unite and fight,' and that sounded right to me. They didn't give a damn about the color bar--they'd look you in the eye and call you --comrade.' Which was more than I ever got from anyone else."

He had all the good reasons in the world for joining the CP in 1931. Later all those good reasons would rise up and wreck us all.

I'm not sure why Earl Sanderson married Lillian, but I understand well enough why Lillian chased Earl for all those years. "Jack," she told me, "he just *glowed*."

Lillian Abbott met Earl when he was a junior in high school. After that first meeting, she spent every spare minute with him. Bought his newspapers, paid his way into the theaters with her pocket change, attended radical meetings. Cheered him at sporting events. She joined the CP a month after he did. And a few weeks after he left Rutgers, summa cum laude, she married him.

"I didn't give Earl any choice," she said. "The only way he'd ever get me to be quiet about it was to marry

me."

Neither of them knew what they were getting into, of course. Earl was wrapped up in issues that were larger than himself, in the revolution he thought was coming, and maybe he thought Lillian deserved a little happiness in this time of bitterness. It didn't cost him anything to say yes.

It cost Lillian just about everything.

Two months after his marriage Earl was on a boat to the Soviet Union, to study at Lenin University for a year, learning to be a proper agent of the Comintern. Lillian stayed at home, working in her mother's shop, attending party meetings that seemed a little lackluster without Earl. Learning, without any great enthusiasm for the task, how to be a revolutionary's wife.

After the year in Russia, Earl went to Columbia for his law degree. Lillian supported him until he graduated and went to work as counsel for A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, one of the most radical unions in America. Earl, Sr., must have been proud.

As the Depression eased, Earl's commitment to the CP waned--maybe the revolution wasn't coming, after all. The GM strike was solved in favor of the CIO when Earl was learning to be a revolutionary in Russia. The Brotherhood won its recognition from the Pullman Company in 1938, and Randolph finally started drawing a salary--he'd worked all those years for free. The union and Randolph were taking up a lot of Earl's time, and his attendance at party meetings began to slide.

When the Nazi-Soviet pact was signed, Earl resigned from the CP in anger. Accommodation with the fascists was not his style.

Earl told me that after Pearl Harbor, the Depression ended for white people when the hiring at defense plants started, but few blacks were given jobs. Randolph and his people finally had enough. Randolph threatened a railway strike--right in the middle of wartime--that was to be combined with a march on Washington. F.D.R. sent his troubleshooter, Archibald Holmes, to work out a settlement. It resulted in Executive Order 8802, in which government contractors were forbidden to discriminate on account of race. It was one of the landmark pieces of legislation in the history of civil rights, and one of the greatest successes in Earl's career. Earl always spoke of it as one of his proudest accomplishments.

The week after Order 8802, Earl's draft classification was changed to 1-A. His work with the rail union wasn't going to protect him. The government was taking its revenge.

Earl decided to volunteer for the Air Corps. He'd always wanted to fly.

Earl was old for a pilot, but he was still an athlete and his conditioning got him past the physical. His record was labeled PAF, meaning Premature Anti-Fascist, which was the official designation for anyone who was unreliable enough not to like Hitler prior to 1941.

He was assigned to the 332nd Fighter Group, an all-black unit. The screening process for the black fliers was so severe that the unit ended up full of professors, ministers, doctors, lawyers--and all these bright people demonstrated first-rate pilots' reflexes as well. Because none of the air groups overseas wanted black pilots, the group remained at Tuskegee for months and months of training. Eventually they received three times as much training as the average group, and when they were finally moved, to bases in Italy, the group known as "the Lonely Eagles" exploded over the European Theater.

They flew their Thunderbolts over Germany and the Balkan countries, including the toughest targets. They flew over fifteen thousand sorties and, during that time, *not a single escorted bomber* was lost to the Luftwaffe. After word got out, bomber groups began asking specifically for the 332nd to escort their



planes.

One of their top fliers was Earl Sanderson, who ended the war with fifty-three "unconfirmed" kills. The kills were unconfirmed because records were not kept for the black squadrons--the military was afraid the black pilots might get larger totals than the whites. Their fear was justified--that number put Earl above every American pilot but Jetboy, who was another powerful exception to a lot of rules.

On the day Jetboy died, Earl had come home from work with what he thought was a bad case of the flu, and the next day he woke up a black ace.

He could fly, apparently by an act of will, up to five hundred miles per hour. Tachyon called it "projection telekinesis."

Earl was pretty tough, too, though not as tough as I was--like me, bullets bounced off him. But cannon rounds could hurt him, and I know he dreaded the possibility of midair collision with a plane.

And he could project a wall of force in front of him, a kind of traveling shock wave that could sweep anything out of his path. Men, vehicles, walls. A sound like a clap of thunder and they'd be thrown a hundred feet.

Earl spent a couple weeks testing his talents before letting the world know about them, flying over the city in his pilot's helmet, black leather flying jacket, and boots. When he finally let people know, Mr. Holmes was one of the first to call.

\* \* \* \*

I met Earl the day after I'd signed on with Mr. Holmes. By then I'd moved into one of Mr. Holmes's spare rooms and had been given a key to the apartment. I was moving up in the world.

I recognized him right away. "Earl Sanderson," I said, before Mr. Holmes could introduce us. I shook his hand. "I remember reading about you when you played for Rutgers."

Earl took that in stride. "You have a good memory," he said.

We sat down, and Mr. Holmes explained formally what he wanted with us, and with others he hoped to recruit later. Earl felt strongly about the term "ace," meaning someone with useful abilities, as opposed to "joker," meaning someone who was badly disfigured by the virus--Earl felt the terms imposed a class system on those who got the wild card, and didn't want to set us at the top of some kind of social pyramid. Mr. Holmes officially named our team the Exotics for Democracy. We were to become visible symbols of American postwar ideals, to lend credit to the American attempt to rebuild Europe and Asia, to continue the fight against fascism and intolerance.

The U.S. was going to create a postwar Golden Age, and was going to share it with the rest of the world. We were going to be its symbol.

It sounded great. I wanted in.

With Earl the decision came a little harder. Holmes had talked to him before and had asked him to make the same kind of deal that Branch Rickey later asked of Jackie Robinson: Earl had to stay out of domestic politics. He had to announce that he'd broken with Stalin and Marxism, that he was committed to peaceful change. He was asked to keep his temper under control, to absorb the inevitable anger, racism, and condescension, and to do it without retaliation.

Earl told me later how he struggled with himself. He knew his powers by then, and he knew he could

change things simply by being present where important things were going on. Southern cops wouldn't be able to smash up integration meetings if someone present could flatten whole companies of state troopers. Strikebreakers would go flying before his wave of force. If he decided to integrate somebody's restaurant, the entire Marine Corps couldn't throw him out--not without destroying the building, anyway.

But Mr. Holmes had pointed out that if he used his powers in that way, it wouldn't be Earl Sanderson who would pay the penalty. If Earl Sanderson were seen reacting violently to provocation, innocent blacks would be strung from oak limbs throughout the country.

Earl gave Mr. Holmes the assurance he wanted. Starting the very next day, the two of us went on to make a lot of history.

\* \* \* \*

The EFD was never a part of the U.S. government. Mr. Holmes consulted with the State Department, but he paid Earl and me out of his own pocket and I lived in his apartment.

The first thing was to deal with Perón. He'd gotten himself elected President of Argentina in a rigged election, and was in the process of turning himself into a South American version of Mussolini and Argentina into a refuge for fascists and war criminals. The Exotics for Democracy flew south to see what we could do about it.

Looking back on things, I'm amazed at our assumptions. We were bent on overthrowing the constitutional government of a large foreign nation, and we didn't think anything about it! Even Earl went along without a second thought. We'd just spent years fighting fascists in Europe, and we didn't see anything remarkably different in moving south and smashing them up there.

When we left, we had another man with us. David Harstein just seemed to talk himself aboard the plane. Here he was, a Jewish chess hustler from Brooklyn, one of those fast-talking curly-haired young guys that you saw all over New York selling flood insurance or used auto tires or custom suits made of some new miracle fiber that was just as good as cashmere, and suddenly he was a member of EFD and calling a lot of the shots. You couldn't help but like him. You couldn't help but agree with him.

He was an exotic, all right. He exuded pheromones that made you feel friendly with him and with the world, that created an atmosphere of bonhomie and suggestibility. He could talk an Albanian Stalinist into standing on his head and singing "The Star-Spangled Banner"--at least, as long as he and his pheromones were in the room. Afterward, when our Albanian Stalinist returned to his senses, he'd promptly denounce himself and have himself shot.

We decided to keep David's powers a secret. We spread a story that he was some kind of sneaky superman, like The Shadow on radio, and that he was our scout. Actually he'd just get into conferences with people and make them agree with us. It worked pretty well.

Perón hadn't consolidated his power yet, having only been in office four months. It took us two weeks to organize the coup that got rid of him. Harstein and Mr. Holmes would go into meetings with army officers, and before they were done the colonels would be swearing to have Perón's head on a plate, and even after they began to think better of things, their sense of honor wouldn't let them back down on their promises.

On the morning of the coup, I found out some of my limitations. I'd read the comics when I was in the Army, and I'd seen how, when the bad guys were trying to speed away in their cars, Superman would jump in front of the car, and the car would bounce off him.

I tried that in Argentina. There was a Peronist major who had to be kept from getting to his command post, and I jumped in front of his Mercedes and got knocked two hundred feet into a statue of Juan P. himself.

The problem was, I wasn't heavier than the car. When things collide, it's the object with the least momentum that gives way, and weight is a component of momentum. It doesn't matter how *strong* the lighter object is.

I got smarter after that. I knocked the statue of Peron off its perch and threw it at the car. That took care of things.

There are a few other things about the ace business that you can't learn from reading comic books. I remember comic aces grabbing the barrels of tank guns and turning them into pretzels.

It is in fact possible to do that, but you have to have the leverage to do it. You've got to plant your feet on something solid in order to have something to push against. It was far easier for me to dive under the tank and knock it off its treads. Then I'd run around to the other side and put my arms around the gun barrel, with my shoulder under the barrel, and then yank down. I'd use my shoulder as the fulcrum of a lever and bend the barrel around myself.

That's what I'd do if I was in a hurry. If I had time, I'd punch my way through the bottom of the tank and rip it apart from the inside.

But I digress. Back to Peron.

There were a couple critical things that had to be done. Some loyal Peronists couldn't be gotten to, and one of them was the head of an armored battalion quartered in a walled compound on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. On the night of the coup, I picked up one of the tanks and dropped it on its side in front of the gate, and then I just braced my shoulder against it and held it in place while the other tanks battered themselves into junk trying to move it.

Earl immobilized Peron's air force. He just flew behind the planes on the runway and tore off the stabilizers.

Democracy was victorious. Peron and his blond hooker took off for Portugal.

I gave myself a few hours off. While triumphant middle-class mobs poured into the street to celebrate, I was in a hotel room with the daughter of the French ambassador. Listening to the chanting mob through the window, the taste of champagne and Nicolette on my tongue, I concluded this was better than flying.

Our image got fashioned in that campaign. I was wearing old Army fatigues most of the time, and that's the view of me most people remember. Earl was wearing tan Air Force officer's fatigues with the insignia taken off, boots, helmet, goggles, scarf, and his old leather flying jacket with the 332nd patch on the shoulder. When he wasn't flying he'd take the helmet off and put on an old black beret he kept in his hip pocket. Often, when we were asked to make personal appearances, Earl and I were asked to dress in our fatigues so everyone would know us. The public never seemed to realize that most of the time we wore suits and ties, just like everyone else.

\* \* \* \*

When Earl and I were together, it was often in a combat situation, and for that reason we became best friends! people in combat become close very quickly. I talked about my life, my war, about women. He was a little more guarded--maybe he wasn't sure how I'd take hearing his exploits with white girls--but

eventually, one night when we were in northern Italy looking for Bormann, I heard all about Orlena Goldoni.

"I used to have to paint her stockings on in the morning," Earl said. "I'd have to make up her legs, so it would look like she had silk stockings. And I'd have to paint the seam down the back in eyeliner." He smiled. "That was a paint job I always enjoyed doing."

"Why didn't you just give her some stockings?" I asked. They were easy enough to come by. GIs wrote to their friends and relatives in the States to send them.

"I gave her lots of pairs," Earl shrugged, "but Lena'd give --em away to the comrades."

Earl hadn't kept a photo of Lena, not where Lillian could find it, but I saw her in the pictures later, when she was billed as Europe's answer to Veronica Lake. Tousled blond hair, broad shoulders, a husky voice. Lake's screen persona was cool, but Goldoni's was hot. The silk stockings were real in the pictures, but so were the legs under them, and the picture celebrated Lena's legs as often as the director thought he could get away with it. I remember thinking how much fun Earl must have had painting her.

She was a cabaret singer in Naples when they met, in one of the few clubs where black soldiers were allowed. She was eighteen and a black marketeer and a former courier for the Italian Communists. Earl took one look at her and threw caution to the winds. It was maybe the one time in his entire life that he indulged himself. He started taking chances. Slipping off the field at night, dodging MP patrols to be with her, sneaking back early in the morning and being on the flight line ready to take off for Bucharest or Ploesti"

"We knew it wasn't forever," Earl said. "We knew the war would end sooner or later." There was a kind of distance in his eyes, the memory of a hurt, and I could see how much leaving Lena had cost him. "We were grownups about it." A long sigh. "So we said goodbye. I got discharged and went back to work for the union. And we haven't seen each other since." He shook his head. "Now she's in the pictures. I haven't seen any of them."

The next day, we got Bormann. I held him by his monk's cowl and shook him till his teeth rattled. We turned him over to the representative of the Allied War Crimes Tribunal and gave ourselves a few days' leave.

Earl seemed more nervous than I'd ever seen him. He kept disappearing to make phone calls. The press always followed us around, and Earl jumped every time a camera bulb went off. The first night, he disappeared from our hotel room, and I didn't see him for three days.

Usually I was the one exhibiting this kind of behavior, always sneaking off to spend some time with a woman. Earl's doing it caught me by surprise.

He'd spent the weekend with Lena, in a little hotel north of Rome. I saw their pictures together in the Italian papers on Monday morning--somehow the press found out about it. I wondered whether Lillian had heard, what she was thinking. Earl showed up, scowling, around noon on Monday, just in time for his flight to India: he was going to Calcutta to see Gandhi. Earl wound up stepping between the Mahatma and the bullets that some fanatic fired at him on the steps of the temple--and all of a sudden the papers were full of India, with what had just happened in Italy forgotten. I don't know how Earl explained it to Lillian.

Whatever it was he said, I suppose Lillian believed him. She always did.

\* \* \* \*

Glory years, these. With the fascist escape route to South America cut, the Nazis were forced to stay in Europe where it was easier to find them. After Earl and I dug Bormann out of his monastery, we plucked Mengele from a farm attic in Bavaria and we got so close to Eichmann in Austria that he panicked and ran out into the arms of a Soviet patrol, and the Russians shot him out of hand. David Harstein walked into the Escorial on a diplomatic passport and talked Franco into making a live radio address in which he resigned and called for elections, and then David stayed with him on the plane all the way to Switzerland. Portugal called for elections right afterward, and PerÃ³n had to find a new home in Nanking, where he became a military adviser to the generalissimo. Nazis were bailing out of Iberia by the dozen, and the Nazi hunters caught a lot of them.

I was making a lot of money. Mr. Holmes wasn't paying me much in the way of wages, but I got a lot for making the Chesterfield endorsement and for selling my story to *Life*, and I had a lot of paid speaking engagements--Mr. Holmes hired me a speechwriter. My half of the Park Avenue apartment was free, and I never had to pay for a meal if I didn't want to. I got large sums for articles that were written over my name, things like "Why I Believe in Tolerance" and "What America Means to Me," and "Why We Need the U.N." Hollywood scouts were making incredible offers for long-term contracts, but I wasn't interested just yet. I was seeing the world.

So many girls were visiting me in my room that the tenants' association talked about installing a revolving door.

The papers started calling Earl "the Black Eagle," from the 332nd's nickname, "the Lonely Eagles." He didn't like the name much. David Harstein, by those few who knew of his talent, was "the Envoy." I was "Golden Boy," of course. I didn't mind.

EFD got another member in Blythe Stanhope van Renssaeler, who the papers started calling "Brain Trust." She was a petite, proper upper-crust Boston lady, high-strung as a thoroughbred, married to a scumbag New York congressman by whom she'd had three kids. She had the kind of beauty that took a while for you to notice, and then you wondered why you hadn't seen it before. I don't think she ever knew how lovely she really was.

She could absorb minds. Memories, abilities, everything.

Blythe was older than me by about ten years, but that didn't bother me, and before long I started flirting with her. I had plenty of other female companionship, and everyone knew that, so if she knew anything about me at all--and maybe she didn't, because my mind wasn't important enough to absorb--she didn't take me seriously.

Eventually her awful husband, Henry, threw her out, and she came by our apartment to look for a place to stay. Mr. Holmes was gone, and I was feeling no pain after a few shots of his twenty-year-old brandy, and I offered a bed to stay in--mine, in fact. She blew up at me, which I deserved, and stormed out.

Hell, I hadn't intended her to take the offer as a permanent one. She should have known better.

So, for that matter, should I. Back in --47, most people would rather marry than burn. I was an exception. And Blythe was too high-strung to fool with--she was on the edge of nervous collapse half the time, with all the knowledge in her head, and one thing she didn't need was a Dakota farm boy pawing at her on the night her marriage ended.

Soon Blythe and Tachyon were together. It didn't do my self-esteem any good to be turned down for a being from another planet, but I'd gotten to know Tachyon fairly well, and I'd decided he was okay in spite of his liking for brocade and satin. If he made Blythe happy, that was fine with me. I figured he had to have something right with him to persuade a bluestocking like Blythe to actually live in sin.

The term "ace" caught on just after Blythe joined the EFD, so suddenly we were the Four Aces. Mr. Holmes was Democracy's Ace in the Hole, or the Fifth Ace. We were good guys, and everyone knew it.

It was amazing, the amount of adulation we received. The public simply wouldn't *allow* us to do anything wrong. Even die-hard bigots referred to Earl Sanderson as "our colored flyboy." When he spoke out on segregation, or Mr. Holmes on populism, people listened.

Earl was consciously manipulating his image, I think. He was smart, and he knew how the machinery of the press worked. The promise he'd given with such struggle to Mr. Holmes was fully justified by events. He was consciously molding himself into a black hero, an untarnished figure of aspiration. Athlete, scholar, union leader, war hero, faithful husband, ace. He was the first black man on the cover of *Time*, the first on *Life*. He had replaced Robeson as the foremost black ideal, as Robeson wryly acknowledged when he said, "I can't fly, but then Earl Sanderson can't sing."

Robeson was wrong, by the way.

Earl was flying higher than he ever had. He hadn't realized what happens to idols when people find out about their feet of clay.

\* \* \* \*

The Four Aces' failures came the next year, in --48. When the Communists were on the verge of taking over in Czechoslovakia we flew to Germany in a big rush, and then the whole thing was called off. Someone at the State Department had decided the situation was too complicated for us to fix, and he'd asked Mr. Holmes not to intervene. I heard a rumor later that the government had been recruiting some ace talents of their own for covert work, and that they'd been sent in and made a bungle of it. I don't know if that's true or not.

Then, two months after the Czechoslovakian fiasco, we were sent into China to save a billion-odd people for democracy.

It was not apparent at the time, but our side had already lost. On paper, things seemed retrievable--the generalissimo's Kuomintang still held all the major cities, their armies were well-equipped, compared to Mao and his forces, and it was well known that the generalissimo was a genius. If he weren't, why had Mr. Luce made him *Time*--s Man of the Year twice?

On the other hand, the Communists were marching south at a steady rate of twenty-three point five miles per day, rain or shine, summer or winter, redistributing land as they went. Nothing could stop them--certainly not the generalissimo.

By the time we were called in, the generalissimo had resigned--he did that from time to time, just to prove to everyone that he was indispensable. So the Four Aces met with the new KMT president, a man named Chen who was always looking over his shoulder lest he be replaced once the Great Man decided to make another dramatic entrance to save the country.

The U.S. position, by then, was prepared to concede north China and Manchuria, which the KMT had already lost barring the big cities. The idea was to save the south for the generalissimo by partitioning the country. The Kuomintang would get a chance to establish itself in the south while they organized for an eventual reconquest, and the Communists would get the northern cities without having to fight for them.

We were all there, the Four Aces and Holmes--Blythe was included as a scientific adviser and ended up giving little speeches about sanitation, irrigation, and inoculation. Mao was there, and Zhou En-lai, and President Chen. The generalissimo was off in Canton sulking in his tent, and the People's Liberation

Army was laying siege to Mukden in Manchuria and otherwise marching steadily south, twenty-three point five miles per day, under Lin Biao.

Earl and I didn't have much to do. We were observers, and mostly what we observed were the delegates. The KMT people were astonishingly polite, they dressed well, they had uniformed servants who scuttled about on their errands. Their interaction with one another looked like a minuet.

The PLA people looked like soldiers. They were smart, proud, military in the way that real soldiers are military, without all the white-glove prissy formality of the KMT. The PLA had been to war, and they weren't used to losing. I could tell that at a glance.

It was a shock. All I knew about China was what I'd read in Pearl Buck. That, and the certified genius of the generalissimo.

"*These* guys are fighting *those* guys?" I asked Earl.

"*Those* guys"--Earl was indicating the KMT crowd--"aren't fighting anyone. They're ducking for cover and running away. That's part of the problem."

"I don't like the looks of this," I said.

Earl seemed a little sad. "I don't, either," he said. He spat. "The KMT officials have been stealing land from the peasants. The Communists are giving the land back, and that means they've got popular support. But once they've won the war they'll take it back, just like Stalin did."

Earl knew his history. Me, I just read the papers.

Over a period of two weeks Mr. Holmes worked out a basis for negotiation, and then David Harstein came into the room and soon Chen and Mao were grinning at each other like old school buddies at a reunion, and in a marathon negotiating session China was formally partitioned. The KMT and the PLA were ordered to be friends and lay down their arms.

It all fell apart within days. The generalissimo, who had no doubt been told of our perfidy by ex-Colonel PerÃ³n, denounced the agreement and returned to save China. Lin Biao never stopped marching south. And after a series of colossal battles, the certified genius of the generalissimo ended up on an island guarded by the U.S. fleet--along with Juan PerÃ³n and his blond hooker, who had to move again.

Mr. Holmes told me that when he flew back across the Pacific with the partition in his pocket, while the agreement unraveled behind him and the cheering crowds in Hong Kong and Manila and Oahu and San Francisco grew even smaller, he kept remembering Neville Chamberlain and his little piece of paper, and how Chamberlain's "peace in Europe" turned into conflagration, and Chamberlain into history's dupe, the sad example of a man who meant well but who had too much hope, and trusted too much in men more experienced in treachery than he.

Mr. Holmes was no different. He didn't realize that while he'd gone on living and working for the same ideals, for democracy and liberalism and fairness and integration, the world was changing around him, and that because he didn't change with the world, the world was going to hammer him into the dust.

At this point the public were still inclined to forgive us, but they remembered that we'd disappointed them. Their enthusiasm was a little lessened.

And maybe the time for the Four Aces had passed. The big war criminals had been caught, fascism was on the run, and we had discovered our limitations in Czechoslovakia and China.

When Stalin blockaded Berlin, Earl and I flew in. I was in my combat fatigues again, Earl in his leather jacket. He flew patrols over the Russian wire, and the Army gave me a jeep and a driver to play with. Eventually Stalin backed down.

But our activities were shifting toward the personal. Blythe was going off to scientific conferences all over the world, and spent most of the rest of her time with Tachyon. Earl was marching in civil rights demonstrations and speaking all over the country. Mr. Holmes and David Harstein went to work, in that election year, for the candidacy of Henry Wallace.

I spoke alongside Earl at Urban League meetings, and to help out Mr. Holmes I said a few nice things for Mr. Wallace, and I got paid a lot of money for driving the latest-model Chrysler and for talking about Americanism.

After the election I went to Hollywood to work for Louis Mayer. The money was more incredible than anything I'd ever dreamed, and I was getting bored with kicking around Mr. Holmes's apartment. I left most of my stuff in the apartment, figuring it wouldn't be long before I'd be back.

I was pulling down ten thousand per week, and I'd acquired an agent and an accountant and a secretary to answer the phone and someone to handle my publicity; all I had to do at this point was take acting and dance lessons. I didn't actually have to work yet, because they were having script problems with my picture. They'd never had to write a screenplay around a blond superman before.

The script they eventually came up with was based loosely on our adventures in Argentina, and it was called *Golden Boy*. They paid Clifford Odets a lot of money to use that title, and considering what happened to Odets and me later, that linking had a certain irony. When they gave the script to me, I didn't care for it. I was the hero, which was just fine with me. They actually called me "John Brown." But the Harstein character had been turned into a minister's son from Montana, and the Archibald Holmes character, instead of being a politician from Virginia, had become an FBI agent. The worst part was the Earl Sanderson character--he'd become a cipher, a black flunky who was only in a few scenes, and then only to take orders from John Brown and reply with a crisp, "Yes, sir," and a salute. I called up the studio to talk about this.

"We can't put him in too many scenes," I was told. "Otherwise we can't cut him out for the Southern version."

I asked my executive producer what he was talking about.

"If we release a picture in the South, we can't have colored people in it, or the exhibitors won't show it. We write the scenes so that we can release a Southern version by cutting out all the scenes with niggers."

I was astonished. I never knew they did things like that. "Look," I said. "I've made speeches in front of the NAACP and Urban League. I was in *Newsweek* with Mary McLeod Bethune. I can't be seen to be a party to this."

The voice coming over the phone turned nasty. "Look at your contract, Mr. Braun. You don't have script approval."

"I don't want to approve the script. I just want a script that recognizes certain facts about my life. If I do this script, my credibility will be gone. You're fucking with my *image*, here!"

After that it turned unpleasant. I made certain threats and the executive producer made certain threats. I got a call from my accountant telling me what would happen if the ten grand per week stopped coming, and my agent told me I had no legal right to object to any of this.



Finally I called Earl and told him what was going on. "What did you say they were paying you?" he asked.

I told him again.

"Look," he said. "What you do in Hollywood is your business. But you're new there, and you're an unknown commodity to them. You want to stand up for the right, that's good. But if you walk, you won't do me or the Urban League any good. Stay in the business and get some clout, then use it. And if you feel guilty, the NAACP can always use some of that ten grand per week."

So there it was. My agent patched up an understanding with the studio to the effect that I was to be consulted on script changes. I succeeded in getting the FBI dropped from the script, leaving the Holmes character without any set governmental affiliation, and I tried to make the Sanderson character a little more interesting.

I watched the rushes, and they were good. I liked my acting--it was relaxed, anyway, and I even got to step in front of a speeding Mercedes and watch it bounce off my chest. It was done with special effects.

The picture went into the can, and I went from a three-martini lunch into the wrap party without stopping to sober up. Three days later I woke up in Tijuana with a splitting headache and a suspicion that I'd just done something foolish. The pretty little blonde sharing the pillow told me what it was. We'd just got married. When she was in the bath I had to look at the marriage license to find out her name was Kim Wolfe. She was a minor starlet from Georgia who'd been scuffling around Hollywood for six years.

After some aspirin and a few belts of tequila, marriage didn't seem like a half-bad idea. Maybe it was time, with my new career and all, that I settled down.

I bought Ronald Colman's old pseudo-English country house on Summit Drive in Beverly Hills, and I moved in with Kim, and our two secretaries, Kim's hairdresser, our two chauffeurs, our two live-in maids"; suddenly I had all these people on salary, and I wasn't quite sure where they came from.

The next picture was *The Rickenbacker Story*. Victor Fleming was going to direct, with Fredric March as Pershing and June Allyson as the nurse I was supposed to fall in love with. Dewey Martin, of all people, was to play Richthofen, whose Teutonic breast I was going to shoot full of American lead--never mind that the real Richthofen was shot down by someone else. The picture was going to be filmed in Ireland, with an enormous budget and hundreds of extras. I insisted on learning how to fly, so I could do some of the stunts myself. I called Earl long-distance about that.

"Hey," I said. "I finally learned how to fly."

"Some farm boys," he said, "just take a while."

"Victor Fleming's gonna make me an ace."

"Jack." His voice was amused. "You're *already* an ace."

Which stopped me up short, because somehow in all the activity I'd forgotten that it wasn't MGM who made me a star. "You've got a point, there," I said.

"You should come to New York a little more often," Earl said. "Figure out what's happening in the real world."

"Yeah. I'll do that. We'll talk about flying."

"We'll do that."

I stopped by New York for three days on my way to Ireland. Kim wasn't with me--she'd gotten work, thanks to me, and had been loaned to Warner Brothers for a picture. She was very Southern anyway, and the one time she'd been with Earl she'd been very uncomfortable, and so I didn't mind she wasn't there.

I was in Ireland for seven months--the weather was so bad the shooting took forever. I met Kim in London twice, for a week each time, but the rest of the time I was on my own. I was faithful, after my fashion, which meant that I didn't sleep with any one girl more than twice in a row. I became a good enough pilot so that the stunt pilots actually complimented me a few times.

When I got back to California, I spent two weeks at Palm Springs with Kim. *Golden Boy* was going to premiere in two months. On my last day at the Springs, I'd just climbed out of the swimming pool when a congressional aide, sweating in a suit and tie, walked up to me and handed me a pink slip.

It was a subpoena. I was to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities bright and early on Tuesday. The very next day.

\* \* \* \*

I was more annoyed than anything. I figured they obviously had the wrong Jack Braun. I called up Metro and talked to someone in the legal department. He surprised me by saying, "Oh, we thought you'd get the subpoena sometime soon."

"Wait a minute. How'd you know?"

There was a second's uncomfortable silence. "Our policy is to cooperate with the FBI. Look, we'll have one of our attorneys meet you in Washington. Just tell the committee what you know and you can be back in California next week."

"Hey," I said. "What's the FBI got to do with it? And why didn't you tell me this was coming? And what the hell does the committee think I know, anyway?"

"Something about China," the man said. "That was what the investigators were asking us about, anyway."

I slammed the phone down and called Mr. Holmes. He and Earl and David had gotten their subpoenas earlier in the day and had been trying to reach me ever since, but couldn't get ahold of me in Palm Springs.

"They're going to try to break the Aces, farm boy," Earl said. "You'd better get the first flight east. We've got to talk."

I made arrangements, and then Kim walked in, dressed in her tennis whites, just back from her lesson. She looked better in sweat than any woman I'd ever known.

"What's wrong?" she said. I just pointed at the pink slip.

Kim's reaction was fast, and it surprised me. "Don't do what the Ten did," she said quickly. "They consulted with each other and took a hard-line defense, and none of them have worked since." She reached for the phone. "Let me call the studio. We've got to get you a lawyer."

I watched her as she picked up the phone and began to dial. A chill hand touched the back of my neck.

"I wish I knew what was going on," I said.

But I knew. I knew even then, and my knowledge had a precision and a clarity that was terrifying. All I could think about was how I wished I couldn't see the choices quite so clearly.

\* \* \* \*

To me, the Fear had come late. HUAC first went after Hollywood in --47, with the Hollywood Ten. Supposedly the committee was investigating Communist infiltration of the film industry--a ridiculous notion on the face of it, since no Communists were going to get any propaganda in the pictures without the express knowledge and permission of people like Mr. Mayer and the Brothers Warner. The Ten were all current or former Communists, and they and their lawyers agreed on a defense based on the First Amendment rights of free speech and association.

The committee rode over them like a herd of buffalo over a bed of daisies. The Ten were given contempt-of-Congress citations for their refusal to cooperate, and after their appeals ran out years later, they ended up in prison.

The Ten had figured the First Amendment would protect them, that the contempt citations would be thrown out of court within a few weeks at the most. Instead the appeals went on for years, and the Ten went to the slammer, and during that time none of them could find a job.

The blacklist came into existence. My old friends, the American Legion, who had learned somewhat more subtle tactics since going after the Holiday Association with axe handles, published a list of known or suspected Communists so that no one employer had any excuse for hiring anyone on the list. If he hired someone, he became suspect himself, and his name could be added to the list.

None of those called before HUAC had ever committed a crime, as defined by law, nor were they ever accused of crimes. They were not being investigated for criminal activity, but for associations. HUAC had no constitutional mandate to investigate these people, the blacklist was illegal, the evidence introduced at the committee sessions was largely hearsay and inadmissible in a court of law"; none of it mattered. It happened anyway.

HUAC had been silent for a while, partly because their chairman, Parnell, had gotten tossed into the slammer for padding his payroll, partly because the Hollywood Ten appeals were still going through the court. But they'd gotten hungry for all that great publicity they'd gotten when they went after Hollywood, and the public had been whipped into a frenzy with the Rosenberg trials and the Alger Hiss case, so they concluded that the time was right for another splashy investigation.

HUAC's new chairman, John S. Wood of Georgia, decided to go after the biggest game on the planet.

Us.

\* \* \* \*

My MGM attorney met me at the Washington airport. "I'd advise you not to talk with Mr. Holmes or Mr. Sanderson," he said.

"Don't be ridiculous."

"They're going to try to get you to take a First or Fifth Amendment defense," the lawyer said. "The First Amendment defense won't work--it's been turned down on every appeal. The Fifth is a defense against self-incrimination, and unless you've actually done something illegal, you can't use it unless you want to *appear* guilty."

"And you won't work, Jack," Kim said. "Metro won't even release your pictures. The American Legion would picket them all over the country."

"How do I know that I'll work if I talk?" I said. "All you have to do to get on the blacklist is be *called*, for chrissake."

"I've been authorized to tell you from Mr. Mayer," the lawyer said, "that you will remain in his employ if you cooperate with the committee."

I shook my head. "I'm talking with Mr. Holmes tonight." I grinned at them. "We're the Aces, for heaven's sake. If we can't beat some hick congressman from Georgia, we don't *deserve* to work."

So I met Mr. Holmes, Earl, and David at the Statler. Kim said I was being unreasonable and stayed away.

There was a disagreement right from the start. Earl said that the committee had no right to call us in the first place, and that we should simply refuse to cooperate. Mr. Holmes said that we couldn't just concede the fight then and there, that we should defend ourselves in front of the committee--that we had nothing to hide. Earl told him that a kangaroo court was no place to conduct a reasoned defense. David just wanted to give his pheromones a crack at the committee. "The hell with it," I said. "I'll take the First. Free speech and association is something every American understands."

Which I didn't believe for a second, by the way. I just felt that I had to say something optimistic.

I wasn't called that first day--I loitered with David and Earl in the lobby, pacing and gnawing my knuckles, while Mr. Holmes and his attorney played Canute and tried to keep the acid, evil tide from eating the flesh from their bones. David kept trying to talk his way past the guards, but he didn't have any luck--the guards outside were willing to let him come in, but the ones inside the committee room weren't exposed to his pheromones and kept shutting him out.

The media were allowed in, of course. HUAC liked to parade its virtue before the newsreel cameras, and the newsreels gave the circus full play.

I didn't know what was going on inside until Mr. Holmes came out. He walked like a man who'd had a stroke, one foot carefully in front of the other. He was gray. His hands trembled, and he leaned on the arm of his attorney. He looked as if he'd aged twenty years in just a few hours. Earl and David ran up to him, but all I could do was stare in terror as the others helped him down the corridor.

The Fear had me by the neck.

\* \* \* \*

Earl and Blythe put Mr. Holmes in his car, and then Earl waited for my MGM limousine to drive up, and he got into the back with us. Kim looked pouty, squeezed into the corner so he wouldn't touch her, and refused even to say hello.

"Well, I was right," he said. "We shouldn't have cooperated with those bastards at all."

I was still stunned from what I'd seen in the corridor. "I can't figure out why the hell they're doing this."

He fixed me with an amused glance. "Farm boys," he said, a resigned comment on the universe, and then shook his head. "You've got to hit them over the head with a shovel to get them to pay attention."

Kim sniffed. Earl didn't give any indication he'd heard.

"They're power-hungry, farm boy," he said. "And they've been kept out of power by Roosevelt and Truman for a lot of years. They're going to get it back, and they're drumming up this hysteria to do it. Look at the Four Aces and what do you see? A Negro Communist, a Jewish liberal, an F.D.R. liberal, a woman living in sin. Add Tachyon and you've got an alien who's subverting not just the country but our chromosomes. There are probably others as powerful that nobody knows about. And they've all got unearthly powers, so who knows what they're up to? And they're not controlled by the government, they're following some kind of liberal political agenda, so that threatens the power base of most of the people on the committee right there.

"The way I figure it, the government has their own ace talents by now, people we haven't heard of. That means we can be done without--we're too independent and we're politically unsound. China and Czechoslovakia and the names of the other aces---that's an excuse. The point is that if they can break us right in public, they prove they can break anybody. It'll be a reign of terror that will last a generation. Not anyone, not even the President, will be immune."

I shook my head. I had heard the words, but my brain wouldn't accept them. "What can we do about it?" I asked.

Earl's gaze held my eyes. "Not a damn thing, farm boy."

I turned away.

\* \* \* \*

My MGM attorney played a recording of the Holmes hearing for me that night. Mr. Holmes and his attorney, an old Virginia family friend named Cranmer, were used to the ways of Washington and the ways of law. They expected an orderly proceeding, the gentlemen of the committee asking polite questions of the gentlemen witnesses.

The plan had no relation to reality. The committee barely let Mr. Holmes talk--instead they screamed at him, rants full of vicious innuendo and hearsay, and he was never allowed to reply.

I was given a copy of the transcript. Part of it reads like this:

MR. RANKIN: When I look at this disgusting New Deal man who sits before the committee, with his smarty-pants manners and Bond Street clothes and his effete cigarette holder, everything that is American and Christian in me revolts at the sight. The New Deal man! That damned New Deal permeates him like a cancer, and I want to scream, "You're everything that's wrong with America. Get out and go back to Red China where you belong, you New Deal socialist! In China they'll welcome you and your treachery."

CHAIRMAN: The honorable member's time has expired.

MR. RANKIN: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN: Mr. Nixon?

MR. NIXON: What were the names of those people in the State Department who you consulted with prior to your journey to China?

WITNESS: May I remind the committee that those with whom I dealt were American public servants acting in good faith--

MR. NIXON: The committee is not interested in their records. Just their names.

The transcript goes on and on, eighty pages of it altogether. Mr. Holmes had, it appeared, stabbed the generalissimo in the back and lost China to the Reds. He was accused of being soft on communism, just like that parlor-pink Henry Wallace, who he supported for the presidency. John Rankin of Mississippi--probably the weirdest voice on the committee--accused Mr. Holmes of being part of the Jewish-Red conspiracy that had crucified Our Savior. Richard Nixon of California kept asking after names--he wanted to know the people Mr. Holmes consulted with in the State Department so that he could do to them what he'd already done to Alger Hiss. Mr. Holmes didn't give any names and pleaded the First Amendment. That's when the committee really rose to its feet in righteous indignation: they mauled him for hours, and the next day they sent down an indictment for contempt of Congress. Mr. Holmes was on his way to the penitentiary.

He was going to prison, and he hadn't committed a single crime.

\* \* \* \*

"Jesus Christ. I've got to talk to Earl and David."

"I've already advised you against that, Mr. Braun."

"The hell with that. We've got to make plans."

"Listen to him, honey."

"The hell with that." The sound of a bottle clinking against a glass. "There's got to be a way out of this."

\* \* \* \*

When I got to Mr. Holmes's suite, he'd been given a sedative and put to bed. Earl told me that Blythe and Tachyon had gotten their subpoenas and would arrive the next day. We couldn't understand why. Blythe never had any part in the political decisions, and Tachyon hadn't had anything to do with China or American politics at all.

David was called the next morning. He was grinning as he went in. He was going to get even for all of us.

MR. RANKIN: I would like to assure the Jewish gentleman from New York that he will encounter no bias on account of his race. Any man who believes in the fundamental principles of Christianity and lives up to them, whether he is Catholic or Protestant, has my respect and confidence.

WITNESS: May I say to the committee that I object to the characterization of "Jewish gentleman."

MR. RANKIN: You object to being called a Jew or being called a gentleman? What are you kicking about?

After that rocky start, David's pheromones began to infiltrate the room, and though he didn't quite have the committee dancing in a circle and singing "Hava Nagila," he did have them genially agreeing to cancel the subpoenas, call off the hearings, draft a resolution praising the Aces as patriots, send a letter to Mr. Holmes apologizing for their conduct, revoke the contempt of Congress citations for the Hollywood Ten, and in general make fools out of themselves for several hours, right in front of the newsreel cameras. John Rankin called David "America's little Hebe friend," high praise from him. David waltzed out, we saw that ear-to-ear grin, and we pounded him on the back and headed back to the Statler for a celebration.

We had opened the third bottle of champagne when the hotel dick opened the door and congressional aides delivered a new round of subpoenas. We turned on the radio and heard Chairman John Wood give a live address about how David had used "mind control of the type practiced in the Pavlov Institute in

Communist Russia," and that this deadly form of attack would be investigated in full.

I sat down on the bed and stared at the bubbles rising in my champagne glass.

The Fear had come again.

\* \* \* \*

Blythe went in the next morning. Her hands were trembling. David was turned away by hall guards wearing gas masks.

There were trucks with chemical-warfare symbols out front. I found out later that if we tried to fight our way out, they were going to use phosgene on us.

They were constructing a glass booth in the hearing room. David would testify in isolation, through a microphone. The control of the mike was in John Wood's hands.

Apparently HUAC were as shaken as we, because their questioning was a little disjointed. They asked her about China, and since she'd gone in a scientific capacity she didn't have any answers for them about the political decisions. Then they asked her about the nature of her power, how exactly she absorbed minds and what she did with them. It was all fairly polite. Henry van Renssaeler was still a congressman, after all, and professional courtesy dictated they not suggest his wife ran his mind for him.

They sent Blythe out and called in Tachyon. He was dressed in a peach-colored coat and Hessian boots with tassels. He'd been ignoring his attorney's advice all along--he went in with the attitude of an aristocrat whose reluctant duty was to correct the misapprehensions of the mob.

He outsmarted himself completely, and the committee ripped him to shreds. They nailed him for being an illegal alien, then stomped over him for being responsible for releasing the wild card virus, and to top it all off they demanded the names of the aces he'd treated, just in case some of them happened to be evil infiltrators influencing the minds of America at the behest of Uncle Joe Stalin. Tachyon refused.

They deported him.

\* \* \* \*

Harstein went in the next day, accompanied by a file of Marines dressed for chemical warfare. Once they had him in the glass booth they tore into him just as they had Mr. Holmes. John Wood held the button on the mike and would never let him talk, not even to answer when Rankin called him a slimy kike, right there in public. When he finally got his chance to speak, David denounced the committee as a bunch of Nazis. That sounded to Mr. Wood like contempt of Congress.

By the end of the hearing, David was going to prison, too.

Congress adjourned for the weekend. Earl and I were going before the committee on Monday next.

\* \* \* \*

We sat in Mr. Holmes's suite Friday night and listened to the radio, and it was all bad. The American Legion was organizing demonstrations in support of the committee all around the country. There were rounds of subpoenas going out to people over the country who were known to have ace abilities--no deformed jokers got called, because they'd look bad on camera. My agent had left a message telling me that Chrysler wanted their car back, and that the Chesterfield people had called and were worried.

I drank a bottle of scotch. Blythe and Tachyon were in hiding somewhere. David and Mr. Holmes were zombies, sitting in the corner, their eyes sunken, turned inward to their own personal agony. None of us had anything to say, except Earl. "I'll take the First Amendment, and damn them all," he said. "If they put me in prison, I'll fly to Switzerland."

I gazed into my drink. "I can't fly, Earl," I said.

"Sure you can, farm boy," he said. "You told me yourself."

"*I can't fly, dammit!* Leave me alone."

I couldn't stand it anymore, and took another bottle with me and went to bed. Kim wanted to talk and I just turned my back and pretended to be asleep.

\* \* \* \*

"Yes, Mr. Mayer."

"Jack? This is terrible, Jack, just terrible."

"Yes, it is. These bastards, Mr. Mayer. They're going to wreck us."

"Just do what the lawyer says, Jack. You'll be fine. Do the brave thing."

"Brave?" Laughter. "*Brave?*"

"It's the right thing, Jack. You're a hero. They can't touch you. Just tell them what you know, and America will love you for it."

"You want me to be a rat."

"Jack, Jack. Don't use those kind of words. It's a patriotic thing I want you to do. The right thing. I want you to be a hero. And I want you to know there's always a place at Metro for a hero."

"How many people are gonna buy tickets to see a rat, Mr. Mayer? How many?"

"Give the phone to the lawyer, Jack. I want to talk to him. You be a good boy and do what he says."

"The hell I will."

"Jack. What can I do with you? Let me talk to the lawyer."

\* \* \* \*

Earl was floating outside my window. Raindrops sparkled on the goggles perched atop his flying helmet. Kim glared at him and left the room. I got out of bed and went to the window and opened it. He flew in, dropped his boots onto the carpet, and lit a smoke.

"You don't look so good, Jack."

"I have a hangover, Earl."

He pulled a folded *Washington Star* out of his pocket. "I have something here that'll sober you up. Have you seen the paper?"

"No. I haven't seen a damn thing."



He opened it. The headline read: STALIN ANNOUNCES SUPPORT FOR ACES.

I sat on the bed and reached for the bottle. "Jesus."

Earl threw the paper down. "He wants us to go down. We kept him out of Berlin, for god's sake. He has no reason to love us. He's persecuting his own wild card talents over there."

"The bastard, the bastard." I closed my eyes. Colors throbbled on the backs of my lids. "Got a butt?" I asked. He gave me one, and a light from his wartime Zippo. I leaned back in bed and rubbed the bristles on my chin.

"The way I see it," Earl said, "we're going to have ten bad years. Maybe we'll even have to leave the country." He shook his head. "And then we'll be heroes again. It'll take at least that long."

"You sure know how to cheer a guy up."

He laughed. The cigarette tasted vile. I washed the taste away with scotch.

The smile left Earl's face, and he shook his head. "It's the people that are going to be called after us--those are the ones I'm sorry for. There's going to be a witch hunt in this country for years to come." He shook his head. "The NAACP is paying for my lawyer. I just might give him back. I don't want any organization associated with me. It'll just make it harder for them later."

"Mayer's been on the phone."

"Mayer." He grimaced. "If only those guys who run the studios had stood up when the Ten went before the committee. If they'd shown some guts none of this would ever have happened." He gave me a look. "You'd better get a new lawyer. Unless you take the Fifth." He frowned. "The Fifth is quicker. They just ask you your name, you say you won't answer, then it's over."

"What difference does the lawyer make, then?"

"You've got a point there." He gave me a ragged grin. "It really *isn't* going to make any difference, is it? Whatever we say or do. The committee will do what they want, either way."

"Yeah. It's over."

His grin turned, as he looked at me, to a soft smile. For a moment, I saw the glow that Lillian had said surrounded him. Here he was, on the verge of losing everything he'd worked for, about to be used as a weapon that would cudgel the civil rights movement and antifascism and antiimperialism and labor and everything else that mattered to him, knowing that his name would be anathema, that anyone he'd ever associated with would soon be facing the same treatment and he'd accepted it all somehow, saddened of course, but still solid within himself. The Fear hadn't even come close to touching him. He wasn't afraid of the committee, of disgrace, of the loss of his position and standing. He didn't regret an instant of his life, a moment's dedication to his beliefs.

"It's over?" he said. There was a fire in his eyes. "Hell, Jack," he laughed, "it's not over. One committee hearing ain't the war. We're aces. They can't take that away. Right?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"I better leave you to fix your hangover." He went to the window. "Time for my morning constitutional, anyway."

"See you later."

He gave me the thumbs-up sign as he threw a leg over the sill. "Take care, farm boy."

"You too."

I got out of bed to close the window just as the drizzle turned to downpour. I looked outside into the street. People were running for cover.

\* \* \* \*

"Earl *really was a Communist*, Jack. He belonged to the party for years, he went to Moscow to study. Listen, darling"--imploring now--"*you can't help him*. He's going to get crucified no matter what you do."

"I can show him he ain't alone on the cross."

"Swell. Just swell. I'm married to a martyr. Just tell me, how are you helping your friends by taking the Fifth? Holmes isn't coming back to public life. David's hustled himself right into prison. Tachyon's being deported. And Earl's doomed, sure as anything. You can't even carry their cross for them."

"Now who's being sarcastic?"

Screaming now. "*Will you put down that bottle and listen to me?* This is something your country wants you to do! It's the right thing!"

I couldn't stand it anymore, so I went for a walk in the cold February afternoon. I hadn't eaten all day and I had a bottle of whiskey in me, and the traffic kept hissing past as I walked, the rain drizzling in my face, soaking through my light California jacket, and I didn't notice any of it. I just thought of those faces, Wood and Rankin and Francis Case, the faces and the hateful eyes and the parade of constant insinuations, and then I started running for the Capitol. I was going to find the committee and smash them, bang heads together, make them run gabbling in fear. I'd brought democracy to Argentina, for chrissake, and I could bring it to Washington the same way.

The Capitol windows were dark. Cold rain gleamed on the marble. No one was there. I prowled around looking for an open door, and then finally I bashed through a side entrance and headed straight for the committee room. I yanked the door open and stepped inside.

It was empty, of course. I don't know why I was so surprised. There were only a few spotlights on. David's glass booth gleamed in the soft light like a piece of fine crystal. Camera and radio equipment sat in its place. The chairman's gavel glowed with brass and polish. Somehow, as I stood like an imbecile in the hushed silence of the room, the anger went out of me.

I sat down in one of the chairs and tried to remember what I was doing here. It was clear the Four Aces were doomed. We were bound by the law and by decency, and the committee was not. The only way we could fight them was to break the law, to rise up in their smug faces and smash the committee room to bits, laughing as the congressmen dived for cover beneath their desks. And if we did that we'd become what we fought, an extralegal force for terror and violence. We'd become what the committee claimed we were. And that would only make things worse.

The Aces were going down, and nothing could stop it.

As I came down the Capitol steps, I felt perfectly sober. No matter how much I'd had to drink, the booze couldn't stop me from knowing what I knew, from seeing the situation in all its appalling,

overwhelming clarity.

I knew, I'd known all along, and I couldn't pretend that I didn't.

\* \* \* \*

I walked into the lobby next morning with Kim on one side and the lawyer on the other. Earl was in the lobby, with Lillian standing there clutching her purse.

I couldn't look at them. I walked past them, and the Marines in their gas masks opened the door, and I walked into the hearing room and announced my intention to testify before the committee as a friendly witness.

\* \* \* \*

Later, the committee developed a procedure for friendly witnesses. There would be a closed session first, just the witness and the committee, a sort of dress rehearsal so that everyone would know what they were going to talk about and what information was going to be developed, so things would go smoothly in public session. That procedure hadn't been worked out when I testified, so everything went a little roughly.

I sweated under the spotlights, so terrified I could barely speak--all I could see were those nine sets of evil little eyes staring at me from across the room, and all I could hear were their voices, booming at me from the loudspeakers like the voice of God.

Wood started off, asking me the opening questions: who I was, where I lived, what I did for a living. Then he started going into my associations, starting with Earl. His time ran out and he turned me over to Kearney.

"Are you aware that Mr. Sanderson was once a member of the Communist party?"

I didn't even hear the question. Kearney had to repeat it.

"Huh? Oh. He told me, yes."

"Do you know if he is currently a member?"

"I believe he split with the party after the Nazi-Soviet thing."

"In 1939."

"If that's what, when, the Nazi-Soviet thing happened. --Thirty-nine. I guess." I'd forgotten every piece of stagecraft I'd never known. I was fumbling with my tie, mumbling into the mike, sweating. Trying not to look into those nine sets of eyes.

"Are you aware of any Communist affiliations maintained by Mr. Sanderson subsequent to the Nazi-Soviet pact?"

"No."

Then it came. "He has mentioned to you no names of persons belonging to Communist or Communist-affiliated groups?"

I said the first thing that came into my head. Not even thinking. "There was some girl, I think, in Italy. That he knew during the war. I think her name was Lena Goldoni. She's an actress now."

Those sets of eyes didn't even blink. But I could see little smiles on their faces. And I could see the reporters out of the corner of my eye, bending suddenly over their notepads.

"Could you spell the name, please?"

\* \* \* \*

So there was the spike in Earl's coffin. Whatever could have been said about Earl up to then, it would have at least revealed himself true to his principles. The betrayal of Lillian implied other betrayals, perhaps of his country. I'd destroyed him with just a few words, and at the time I didn't even know what it was I was doing.

I babbled on. In a sweat to get it over, I said anything that came into my head. I talked about loving America, and about how I just said those nice things about Henry Wallace to please Mr. Holmes, and I'm sure it was a foolish thing to have done. I didn't want to change the Southern way of life, the Southern way of life was a fine way of life. I saw *Gone With the Wind* twice, a great picture. Mrs. Bethune was just a friend of Earl's I got photographed with. Velde took over the questioning.

"Are you aware of the names of any so-called aces who may be living in this country today?"

"No. None, I mean, besides those who have already been given subpoenas by the committee."

"Do you know if Earl Sanderson knows any such names?"

"No."

"He has not confided to you in any way?"

I took a drink of water. How many times could they repeat this? "If he knows the names of any aces, he has not mentioned them in my presence."

"Do you know if Mr. Harstein knows of any such names?"

On and on. "No."

"Do you believe that Dr. Tachyon knows any such names?"

They'd already dealt with this. I was just confirming what they knew. "He's treated many people afflicted by the virus. I assume he knows their names. But he has never mentioned any names to me."

"Does Mrs. van Renssaeler know the existence of any other aces?"

I started to shake my head, then a thought hit me, and I stammered out, "No. Not in herself, no."

Velde plodded on. "Does Mr. Holmes--" he started, and then Nixon sensed something here, in the way I'd just answered the question, and he asked Velde's permission to interrupt. Nixon was the smart one, no doubt. His eager, young chipmunk face looked at me intently over his microphone.

"May I request the witness to clarify that statement?"

I was horrified. I took another drink of water and tried to think of a way out of this. I couldn't. I asked Nixon to repeat the question. He did. My answer came out before he finished.

"Mrs. van Renssaeler has absorbed the mind of Dr. Tachyon. She would know any names that he would know."

The strange thing was, they hadn't figured it out about Blythe and Tachyon up till then. They had to have the big jock from Dakota come in and put the pieces together for them.

I should have just taken a gun and shot her. It would have been quicker.

\* \* \* \*

Chairman Wood thanked me at the end of my testimony. When the chairman of HUAC said thank you, it meant you were okay as far as they were concerned, and other people could associate with you without fear of being branded a pariah. It meant you could have a job in the United States of America.

I walked out of the hearing room with my lawyer on one side and Kim on the other. I didn't meet the eyes of my friends. Within an hour I was on a plane back to California.

The house on Summit was full of congratulatory bouquets from friends I'd made in the picture business. There were telegrams from all over the country about how brave I'd been, about what a patriot I was. The American Legion was strongly represented.

Back in Washington, Earl was taking the Fifth.

\* \* \* \*

They didn't just listen to the Fifth and then let him go. They asked him one insinuating question after another, and made him take the Fifth to each. Are you a Communist? Earl answered with the Fifth. Are you an agent of the Soviet government? The Fifth. Do you associate with Soviet spies? The Fifth. Do you know Lena Goldoni? The Fifth. Was Lena Goldoni your mistress? The Fifth. Was Lena Goldoni a Soviet agent? The Fifth.

Lillian was seated in a chair right behind. Sitting mute, clutching her bag, as Lena's name came up again and again.

And finally Earl had had enough. He leaned forward, his face taut with anger.

"I have better things to do than incriminate myself in front of a bunch of fascists!" he barked, and they promptly ruled he'd waived the Fifth by speaking out, and they asked him the questions all over again. When, trembling with rage, he announced that he'd simply paraphrased the Fifth and would continue to refuse any answer, they cited him for contempt.

He was going to join Mr. Holmes and David in prison.

People from the NAACP met with him that night. They told him to disassociate himself from the civil rights movement. He'd set the cause back fifty years. He was to stay clear in the future.

The idol had fallen. He'd molded his image into that of a superman, a hero without flaw, and once I'd mentioned Lena the populace suddenly realized that Earl Sanderson was human. They blamed him for it, for their own naiveté in believing in him and for their own sudden loss of faith, and in olden times they might have stoned him or hanged him from the nearest apple tree, but in the end what they did was worse.

They let him live.

Earl knew he was finished, was a walking dead man, that he'd given them a weapon that was used to crush him and everything he believed in, that had destroyed the heroic image he'd so carefully crafted, that he'd crushed the hopes of everyone who'd believed in him. He carried the knowledge with him to his

dying day, and it paralyzed him. He was still young, but he was crippled, and he never flew as high again, or as far.

The next day HUAC called Blythe. She broke down on the stand, all the personalities in her head talking at once, and years later she died in an asylum. I don't even want to think about it.

\* \* \* \*

*Golden Boy* opened two months after the hearings. I sat next to Kim at the premiere, and from the moment the film began I realized it had gone terribly wrong. The Earl Sanderson character was gone, just sliced out of the film. The Archibald Holmes character wasn't FBI, but he wasn't independent either, he belonged to that new organization, the CIA. Someone had shot a lot of new footage. The fascist regime in South America had been changed to a Communist regime in Eastern Europe, all run by olive-skinned men with Spanish accents. Every time one of the characters said "Nazi," it was dubbed in "Commie," and the dubbing was loud and bad and unconvincing.

I wandered in a daze through the reception afterward. Everyone kept telling me what a great actor I was, what a great picture it was. The film poster said *Jack Braun--A Hero America Can Trust!* I wanted to vomit.

I left early and went to bed.

I went on collecting ten grand per week while the picture bombed at the box office. I was told the Rickenbacker picture was going to be a big hit, but right now they were having script problems with my next picture. The first two screenwriters had been called up before the committee and ended up on the blacklist because they wouldn't name names. It made me want to weep.

After the Hollywood Ten appeals ran out, the next actor they called was Larry Parks, the man I'd been watching when the virus hit New York. He named names, but he didn't name them willingly enough, and his career was over.

I couldn't seem to get away from the thing. Some people wouldn't talk to me at parties. Sometimes I'd overhear bits of conversation. "Judas Ace." "Golden Rat." "Friendly Witness," said like it was a name, or title.

I bought a Jaguar to make myself feel better.

In the meantime, the North Koreans charged across the 38th Parallel and the U.S. forces were getting crunched at Taejon. I wasn't doing anything other than taking acting lessons a couple times each week.

I called Washington direct. They gave me a lieutenant colonel's rank and flew me out on a special plane.

Metro thought it was a great publicity stunt.

I was given a special helicopter, one of those early Bells, with a pilot from the swamps of Louisiana who exhibited a decided death wish. There was a cartoon of me on the side panels, with one knee up and one arm up high, like I was Superman flying.

I'd get taken behind North Korean lines and then I'd kick ass. It was very simple.

I'd demolish entire tank columns. Any artillery that got spotted by our side were turned into pretzels. I made four North Korean generals prisoner and rescued General Dean from the Koreans that had captured him. I pushed entire supply convoys off the sides of mountains. I was grim and determined and angry, and I was saving American lives, and I was very good at it.

There is a picture of me that got on the cover of *Life*. It shows me with this tight Clint Eastwood smile, holding a T-34 over my head. There is a very surprised North Korean in the turret. I'm glowing like a meteor. The picture was titled *Superstar of Pusan*, "superstar" being a new word back then.

I was very proud of what I was doing.

Back in the States, *Rickenbacker* was a hit. Not as big a hit as everyone expected, but it was spectacular and it made quite a bit of money. Audiences seemed to be a bit ambivalent in their reactions to the star. Even with me on the cover of *Life*, there were some people who couldn't quite see me as a hero.

Metro re-released *Golden Boy*. It flopped again.

I didn't much care. I was holding the Pusan Perimeter. I was right there with the GIs, under fire half the time, sleeping in a tent, eating out of cans and looking like someone out of a Bill Mauldin cartoon. I think it was fairly unique behavior for a light colonel. The other officers hated it, but General Dean supported me--at one point he was shooting at tanks with a bazooka himself--and I was a hit with the soldiers.

They flew me to Wake Island so that Truman could give me the Medal of Honor, and MacArthur flew out on the same plane. He seemed preoccupied the whole time, didn't waste any time in conversation with me. He looked incredibly old, on his last legs. I don't think he liked me.

A week later, we broke out of Pusan and MacArthur landed X Corps at Inchon. The North Koreans ran for it.

Five days later, I was back in California. The Army told me, quite curtly, that my services were no longer necessary. I'm fairly certain it was MacArthur's doing. He wanted to be the superstar of Korea, and he didn't want to share any of the honors. And there were probably other aces--nice, quiet, anonymous aces--working for the U.S. by then.

I didn't want to leave. For a while, particularly after MacArthur got crushed by the Chinese, I kept phoning Washington with new ideas about how to be useful. I could raid the airfields in Manchuria that were giving us such trouble. Or I could be the point man for a breakthrough. The authorities were very polite, but it was clear they didn't want me.

I did hear from the CIA, though. After Dien Bien Phu, they wanted to send me into Indochina to get rid of Bao Dai. The plan seemed half-assed--they had no idea who or what they wanted to put in Bao Dai's place, for one thing; they just expected "native anticommunist liberal forces" to rise and take command--and the guy in charge of the operation kept using Madison Avenue jargon to disguise the fact he knew nothing about Vietnam or any of the people he was supposed to be dealing with.

I turned them down. After that, my sole involvement with the federal government was to pay my taxes every April.

\* \* \* \*

While I was in Korea, the Hollywood Ten appeals ran out. David and Mr. Holmes went to prison. David served three years. Mr. Holmes served only six months and then was released on account of his health. Everyone knows what happened to Blythe.

Earl flew to Europe and appeared in Switzerland, where he renounced his U.S. citizenship and became a citizen of the world. A month later, he was living with Orlena Goldoni in her Paris apartment. She'd become a big star by then. I suppose he decided that since there was no point in concealing their

relationship anymore, he'd flaunt it

Lillian stayed in New York. Maybe Earl sent her money. I don't know.

\* \* \* \*

PerÃ³n came back to Argentina in the mid-1950s, along with his peroxide chippie. The Fear moving south.

I made pictures, but somehow none of them was the success that was expected. Metro kept muttering about my image problem.

People couldn't believe I was a hero. I couldn't believe it either, and it affected my acting. In *Rickenbacker*, I'd had conviction. After that, nothing.

Kim had her career going by now. I didn't see her much. Eventually her detective got a picture of me in bed with the girl dermatologist who came over to apply her makeup every morning, and Kim got the house on Summit Drive, with the maids and gardener and chauffeurs and most of my money, and I ended up in a small beach house in Malibu with the Jaguar in the garage. Sometimes my parties would last weeks.

There were two marriages after that, and the longest lasted only eight months. They cost me the rest of the money I'd made. Metro let me go, and I worked for Warner. The pictures got worse and worse. I made the same western about six times over.

Eventually I bit the bullet. My picture career had died years ago and I was broke. I went to NBC with an idea for a television series.

*Tarzan of the Apes* ran for four years. I was executive producer, and on the screen I played second banana to a chimp. I was the first and only blond Tarzan. I had a lot of points and the series set me up for life.

After that I did what every ex-Hollywood actor does. I went into real estate. I sold actors' homes in California for a while, and then I put a company together and started building apartments and shopping centers. I always used other people's money--I wasn't taking a chance on going broke again. I put up shopping centers in half the small towns in the Midwest.

I made a fortune. Even after I didn't need the money anymore I kept it up. I didn't have much else to do.

When Nixon got elected President I felt ill. I couldn't understand how people could believe that man.

After Mr. Holmes got out of prison he went to work as editor of the *New Republic*. He died in 1955, lung cancer. His daughter inherited the family money. I suppose my clothes were still in his closets.

Two weeks after Earl flew the country, Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois joined the CPUSA, receiving their party cards in a public ceremony in Herald Square. They announced they were joining in protest of Earl's treatment before HUAC.

HUAC called a lot of blacks into their committee room. Even Jackie Robinson was summoned and appeared as a friendly witness. Unlike the white witnesses, the blacks were never asked to name names. HUAC didn't want to create any more black martyrs. Instead the witnesses were asked to denounce the views of Sanderson, Robeson, and Du Bois. Most of them obliged.

Through the 1950s and most of the 1960s, it was difficult to get a grasp on what Earl was doing. He



lived quietly with Lena Goldoni in Paris and Rome. She was a big star, active politically, but Earl wasn't seen much.

He wasn't hiding, I think. Just keeping out of sight. There's a difference.

There were rumors, though. That he was seen in Africa during various wars for independence. That he fought in Algeria against the French and the Secret Army. When asked, Earl refused to confirm or deny his activities. He was courted by left-wing individuals and causes, but rarely committed himself publicly. I think, like me, he didn't want to be used again. But I also think he was afraid that he'd do damage to a cause by associating himself with it.

Eventually the reign of terror ended, just as Earl said it would. While I was swinging on jungle vines as Tarzan, John and Robert Kennedy killed the blacklist by marching past an American Legion picket line to see *Spartacus*, a film written by one of the Hollywood Ten.

Aces began coming out of hiding, entering public life. But now they wore masks and used made-up names, just like the comics I'd read in the war and thought were so silly. It wasn't silly now. They were taking no chances. The Fear might one day return.

Books were written about us. I declined all interviews. Sometimes the question came up in public, and I'd just turn cold and say, "I decline to talk about that at this time." My own Fifth Amendment.

In the 1960s, when the civil rights movement began to heat up in this country, Earl came to Toronto and perched on the border. He met with black leaders and journalists, talked only about civil rights.

But Earl was, by that time, irrelevant. The new generation of black leaders invoked his memory and quoted his speeches, and the Panthers copied his leather jacket, boots, and beret, but the fact of his continuing existence, as a human being rather than a symbol, was a bit disturbing. The movement would have preferred a dead martyr, whose image could have been used for any purpose, rather than a live, passionate man who said his own opinions loud and clear.

Maybe he sensed this when he was asked to come south. The immigration people would probably have allowed it. But he hesitated too long, and then Nixon was President. Earl wouldn't enter a country run by a former member of HUAC.

By the 1970s, Earl settled permanently into Lena's apartment in Paris. Panther exiles like Cleaver tried to make common cause with him and failed.

Lena died in 1975 in a train crash. She left Earl her money.

He'd give interviews from time to time. I tracked them down and read them. According to one interviewer, one of the conditions of the interview was that he wouldn't be asked about me. Maybe he wanted certain memories to die a natural death. I wanted to thank him for that.

There's a story, a legend almost, spread by those who marched on Selma in --65 during the voting rights crusade" that when the cops charged in with their tear gas, clubs, and dogs, and the marchers began to fall before the wave of white troopers, some of the marchers swore that they looked skyward and saw a man flying there, a straight black figure in a flying jacket and helmet, but that the man just hovered there and then was gone, unable to act, unable to decide whether the use of his powers would have aided his cause or worked against it. The magic hadn't come back, not even at such a pivotal moment, and after that there was nothing in his life but the chair in the cafÃ©, the pipe, the paper, and the cerebral hemorrhage that finally took him into whatever it is that waits in the sky.

\* \* \* \*

Every so often, I begin to wonder if it's over, if people have really forgotten. But aces are a part of life now, a part of the background, and the whole world is raised on ace mythology, on the story of the Four Aces and their betrayer. Everyone knows the Judas Ace, and what he looks like.

During one of my periods of optimism I found myself in New York on business. I went to Aces High, the restaurant in the Empire State Building where the new breed of ace hangs out. I was met at the door by Hiram, the ace who used to call himself Fatman until word of his real identity got out, and I could tell right away that he recognized me and that I was making a big mistake.

He was polite enough, I'll give him that, but his smile cost him a certain amount of effort. He seated me in a dark corner, where people wouldn't see me. I ordered a drink and the salmon steak.

When the plate came, the steak was surrounded with a neat circle of dimes. I counted them. Thirty pieces of silver.

I got up and left. I could feel Hiram's eyes on me the whole time. I never came back.

I couldn't blame him at all.

\* \* \* \*

When I was making *Tarzan*, people were calling me well preserved. After, when I was selling real estate and building developments, everyone told me how much the job must be agreeing with me. I looked so young.

If I look in the mirror now, I see the same young guy who was scuffling the New York streets going to auditions. Time hasn't added a line, hasn't changed me physically in any way. I'm fifty-five now, and I look twenty-two. Maybe I won't ever grow old.

I still feel like a rat. But I only did what my country told me.

Maybe I'll be the Judas Ace forever.

Sometimes I wonder about becoming an ace again, putting on a mask and costume so that no one will recognize me. Call myself Muscle Man or Beach Boy or Blond Giant or something. Go out and save the world, or at least a little piece of it.

But then I think, No. I had my time, and it's gone. And when I had the chance, I couldn't even save my own integrity. Or Earl. Or anybody.

I should have kept the dimes. I earned them, after all.