Deserted

EDDIE SLOVIK
(1920-1945)

Private Eddie Slovik 36896415
U.S. Army, 28th Div.
St. Marie aux Mines, France

Supervisor H. Dimmick
Ionia Juvenile Reformatory
Ionia, Michigan

January 30, 1945

Dear Mr. Dimmick,

When you said you hoped to never see me again, you gave me your address so I could write and tell you how I'm doing. I wrote it down in the little book I been carrying for a year ever since they put me in the army. But I never got around to writing to you until the verdict came down and they started moving me around trying to figure out where to do it. I guess I was waiting for things to get better so you wouldn't be disappointed in me, but they only got worse, so here I am finally writing, just in time to make you feel bad, because now you'll really feel like I let you down. I just want to make you feel not so bad. I want to tell you that I tried real hard and for more than a year you'd of been proud of me. I didn't break my word to you. They broke their word, they took me after they said they didn't want me, 4F they said, no use to the army, then all of a sudden I was 1A.

After they took me, the only letters I wrote were to Antoinette. Oh, and the one to General Eisenhower. He never answered, but Antoinette answered near all of my letters. In this army a year now and wrote more letters to her than the number of days I been in the army—sometimes five in one day. The guys used to laugh at me writing and writing while they was playing cards or getting drunk. Writing to keep from going crazy, and sometimes I think I did go crazy, but not crazy enough for the doctors who looked at me for a few minutes today and decided I'm not crazy enough to change my sentence, which is really sort of crazy because they changed the sentences of a lot of guys they know aren't crazy. Not crazy but lucky, not like me.

It was you first told me I been unlucky since I was born, and it made feel better to have someone tell me I wasn't just a bad, worthless, no-good. You said I was unlucky to be born when I was and where I was. Then you said that was no excuse. I still had to do something about it. But you made me feel I might have some good in me to change my luck, which I did for a while, but only for a little while. I guess I was born with too much bad luck to change all of it, not for long.

So now I got no more to write to Antoinette except news that could kill her, so I'm finally writing this letter to you. I just hope you get it. Father Cummings says he will make sure you do, but I don't know. To tell the truth, even if he is a priest I don't trust him to do it. He's good for praying, and I believe him when he says he'll stay with me right up to the end, and he got me all this writing paper, but I think he just wants to keep me busy all night then maybe he'll throw this letter away. I hope not.

I can tell that Father Cummings don't think much of me. He's mostly out there right on the front line. Up there, he says priests are getting killed right and left and coming up as replacements just like I was, then getting killed. He's brave and he likes praying with brave soldiers who keep on shooting. He says they even piss on their guns when they jam in the cold, and keep on shooting and shooting until they get shot. Then he gives them last rites with the bullets and shells still blasting around his ears. So how do you think he must feel about praying with a guy like me? He says we're all children of God, but I don't know if he really believes it or just thinks he believes it and then draws the line at a coward. If he just throws this away after it's all over, he won't think much is lost. Same as the army feels about me. But he's doing his job, just like their all doing their job. What else can they do? No hard feelings. I tried real hard to do my job too, the way you told me, but then all of a sudden they change the job and I can't do it. Father Cummings says the same thing happened to everyone, that's life, the Lord changes the job and you have to do it, but that's not exactly right because I see a lot of guys who figured out ways not to do it, and their back in the stockade safe and sound.

Father Cummings is not as bad as the priest that wouldn't marry me and Antoinette—at my own parish where I went pretty regular after they let me out of Ionia. That priest said it was because of a mix-up with my baptismal papers. My folks was living in Minnesota when I was born and you think they could find a Catholic Church even in Minnesota, but they were probably too drunk to know one church from another. So I ended up with papers from some protestent church I never heard of. So why couldn't the priest at Saint Barbara's just fix the mistake, baptize me again or whatever and give me the right papers so we could have a high nupual mass like we wanted? He said that was against church rules, but I don't believe it because since being in the army I met some Baptist and Lutehran guys married to Catholic girls who only had to sign a paper to promise to baptize the kids. I think that priest at Saint Barbara's turned us down because he knew me from a child, just a no-good kid and then a jail bird, and he didn't want to tie a nice girl like Antoinette to a bum like me, who even had to get permission from his parole officer to get married. No, I think Father Cummings is not as bad as that priest. He don't think much of me, but he says I have a right to whatever the church has to offer. Doing his job. Everybody doing their job, that's how I ended up here.

Don't think because I never wrote before (except our wedding invitation) I didn't appreciate what you did for me. You were the one we wanted at our wedding, not my parents because they never was a real father and mother to me or my brother or my sisters. All they did was drink and fight and beat on us and on each other. They never asked where I was going or who with, or what was going on out there on the street. They didn't care just so I didn't bother them. I was glad they never came to see me when I was in Ionia, and my sisters couldn't come because it was too far and they didn't have a car. I never wanted to see my mother and father while I was there, and I didn't want my sisters to see me locked up. So I didn't mind not having visitors. But it felt good when you took

an interest in me. So I'm sorry you couldn't make it to our wedding because you were the first father I ever had. I mean that. When I got put under you at Ionia, I was eighteen years old and I finally had a father.

Ionia. You know what I found out about Ionia? Probably you know already, but I never asked you, so I only found out a few weeks ago that Ionia was part of Greece a long time before Christ, when Greece spread over into Turkey and a lot of Greek philosophers lived in towns in Ionia. I found this out from Thaddeus, a guy I met in the stockade, smart guy with a good education, should of been an officer. But he messed up so many ways in civilian life, so when they started scraping the bottom of the barrel and took men like him and like me, he messed up in the army till they broke him down to private, and then he got in a fight and killed a guy and got a twenty-year sentence. He's what I call a lucky guy compared to me.

When he heard me say I was in Ionia a couple of years, he laughed and said the country must have a sense of humor, naming their prisons after places in Ancient Greece like Attica and Ionia and—he named more of them that I can't remember. All I can remember is that I heard Attica was a real hard place, not like Ionia, where supervisors like you were trying to help kids like me straighten up and learn a trade, then send us out to make a better life, and not end up someplace like Jackson, which is almost as rough as Attica. I was at Jackson a couple of months before they decided to sent me back to Ionia even though I was over 18, and was I glad. That second time you made me promise you would never see me again, and I sure never wanted to keep my promise this way.

Thaddeus laughed even more when I told him how I ended up a 4F felon because of my bad record from age twelve, plus two stretches at Ionia. He laughed harder and harder—sometimes his laugh sounds nasty, but it don't pay to get mad at him—when I told him the stupid things we did, like trying to steal brass from the foundry and the beat cop walking right in on us. Thaddeus said was that your idea, Eddie? What a genius you are, Eddie. Then that nasty laugh. I told him I don't remember getting many ideas. Someone was always coming up with something, and I'd go along, I don't know why, because they were my friends, and I didn't want to make them mad at me. If I didn't have them I wouldn't have anybody. So I usually just said okay and pretty soon we was all on probation. No excuse, I can just hear you saying it, Mr. D. That's no excuse, Eddie, you know right from wrong.

And, for sure, I got that embezzlement conviction all on my own, no excuse. Thaddeus looked bug-eyed at me when I said I got sent to Ionia the first time for stealing candy and cakes from the drugstore where I worked. How much? About sixty dollars worth by the time my boss caught me. Thaddeus shaking his head when he heard they kept me a whole two years, even with good behavior. But that was just to help me, because they took one look at my folks and voted against sending me back to a "unsuitable home enviroment." When I got out, I was on my own with a job in a grocery store. I didn't steal anything there. I meant to do better, but one night me and the guys got drunk and found a car with the keys in, and ended up smashing into a wall, grand theft auto, drunk driving.

By the time I finish telling about that, Thaddeus is rolling on the floor again, saying he did all that and his folks paid off the store he stole from and paid the guy whose car he wrecked, and got him a good lawyer, and how the hell could I get three-to-seven years for joy-riding?

You'd of been proud of what I told him, just like you used to say to me, that a good man obeys the law, simple as that. But Thaddeus only said, so is that how you ended up here, obeying the law? I didn't try to explain how it was different. A guy like Thaddeus, with a couple of years of college, could talk rings around me, a dumb Polack who barely made it through the ninth grade. In 1939 I was already eighteen, so I got sentenced to Jackson. Some of the guys in there—I mean—I was never so scared in my life. I mean, not until I got sent here. After a couple months, they saw how scared I was and took me out of Jackson and sent me back to Ionia, and was I glad.

That was my first good luck for a change. The second bit of good luck was stealing something—for the last time, so help me God. I think you must of been the only super who believed me when I said I stole the wood alcohol out of the furniture shop to rub on my legs when I went to bed at night. I was born so bowlegged they broke all the bones in both my legs and reset them. No sense complaining that they ache all the time. Only time I talked about my legs was when Antoinette would say I married a epileptic cripple, because she had one leg shorter than the other. I would say, then we're both cripples because my legs and feet barely work, and they ache all the time, and besides, your so beautiful. I would tell her that over and over and she knew I meant it.

Taking the alcohol made the furniture shop super so mad he kicked me out, and they sent me to you. Best thing ever happened to me in my life up to then. Best three years of my life (next to the one great year I had with Antoinette.) Getting assigned to you was like finally getting a real father—a father who cared—a father who believed I could do better, who was teaching me how to work along side of him, was always sober, strict but never got mad, calm all the time. Three years.

Only time you ever yelled at me was when Pearl Harbor was bombed. We were up at that mental hospital repairing tables, because you trusted me to go outside and work with you. Everything stopped and you and the doctors and nurses was glued to the radio, and I was getting real nervous about that crazy guy who kept beating on the window, and usually you'd just calm me down when something like that happened, because you knew what bad nerves I have. But this time you yelled at me—loud— shut up so we can hear what the president is saying.

All day the radio kept saying the same thing. We got bombed somewhere in Hawaii, and now we were in the war with the Japs or the Germans or both? I knew it was important, but all that war stuff mixed me up. I never read much but the headlines, quit school before we got civics class, and besides our history books stopped at Teddy Roosevelt, so this was just another Roosevelt. Sure I knew there was a war, but that was happening far away, and I had enough to do just trying to handle what was right in front of me.

Anyway, you kept telling me I was worth something. Your a good worker, you would tell me. You got a good heart. Your not mad at anyone. You can read and write, and your not stupid. You know how to listen and do what your told. Trouble is you always listened to the wrong people. You got to listen to the right people. Listen to me, now, hear?

You were the first to tell me that not everything was my own fault. You don't know what big news that was to me. All my life people telling me I'm stupid and ignorant and no good—even the guys I run with and got in trouble with said I was dumb. You said to me, I still remember, most people have some bad luck sometime, and Eddie,

you started out unlucky, still a kid going into the Depression, with folks who couldn't take hard times. Some people are like that, and when things are bad, they just make more of a mess, with drinking and fighting. But thats not your fault, you hear me?

Then you would stare into my eyes, not mean or hard, just serious. Look at me, Eddie, you'd say, you have to learn what your folks didn't learn and didn't teach you. That bad luck and hard times is no excuse. Your job is to change your luck, you would say, just a few simple things you got to do. A few rules to change your luck.

I could recite them in my sleep, you said those rules so many times while you was teaching me wood finishing. Learn a trade, work hard, obey the law, always tell the truth, go to church, don't get drunk, stay away from bad company, find a good woman, get married, stay faithful, have a couple kids, make a good home for them. That's the good life, don't let anyone tell you different. Very simple, Eddie, that's how you change your luck if you really want to. And I think you really want to. I trust you, Eddie. Three out of four of our boys end up back here or at Jackson. I'm betting on you to get out of here and stay out.

Just saying that over and over again really built me up. My sister Margaret could see that, so she went to bat for me. The only thing I didn't have so I could make parole was a job. She asked everyone she knew, but nobody had a furniture shop for me to do woodwork, and she didn't know much about places to work anyway. Her job was taking care of three kids for this Italian plumber, Jim Mantella, so she was in his home in Deerborn all the time with his kids, except when she went to his plumbing shop where her friend worked, her wonderful friend Antoinette Wisniewski. The two of them worked on Mr. Mantella. You need another helper, Margaret kept telling him. At first he said no. Then he said maybe I could use a laborer, somebody willing to dig around sewer pipes, hard work and dirty, will your brother do that? Fifty cents an hour.

Who'd of thought that the girl who wrote the letter to the Parole Board promising me a job would turn out to be just the girl I needed? I didn't even have to start off nervous, trying to explain to Antoinette that I had a bad record and had been in Ionia. She knew. She wanted to help. It was just like you told me, you said, Eddie, just turn in the right direction and you'll see everything start going your way.

I remember going through that gate in April, snow still on the ground, 1942, a job waiting for me, twenty-two years old, two years of probation and then I'd be clear. Everyone was being drafted, but I was 4F-felon, so the army didn't want me, even after I got off probation, if the war lasted that long. So even my ten year bad record, starting when I was twelve, was turning my way too. Maybe I'd used up all the bad luck that was coming to me, and from now on it was my turn to have good luck.

Remember the last time you saw me? You stood at the gate and shook my hand. You said, we have to send you back to your folks place, but try to get out of there soon as you can. And stay away from those friends you got in trouble with. I just kept nodding my head, and you said, get in touch if there's anything I can do, but I can't do much really, you have to do it for yourself. That was when you wrote down your address for me and you said, I don't want to see you here again, Eddie, and I said you won't, sir, I promise, but I didn't know you never would see me again anywhere.

My folks hadn't changed, but I just slept there then headed to Dearborn every day to work. It was like waking up in hell and going only six or seven miles to heaven every day. Even though the war was on, and there was plenty of jobs, guys I knew in the

Detroit projects were still hanging out on the streets or falling out of the bars, those the army didn't want. In Dearborn I'd get off the bus and walk past little houses where families—polacks just like us—owned the place they lived in, with nice little gardens and clotheslines, and after a few weeks of me walking by the ladies hanging their wash would even nod and smile at me like I was a real neighbor, not a bum from the projects. I'd work all day at the plumbing shop, then stay awhile cleaning up, because I didn't want to go back to my folks place.

You heard of love at first sight. Bet you never believed in it. Neither did I, but soon as I walked into Mantella Plumbing it hit me, first time I saw Antoinette sitting at her desk. My sister brought me in the first day, but she didn't have to introduce us. Antoinette smiles at me and says, I know you, your Eddie. How do you do? And shakes my hand. Like the song—my heart stood still.

Everything about Antoinette was special. The way she looked, the way she talked, the way she dressed. The girls I knew back in the old neighborhood—the ones the gang went after and got pregnant and then married if they didn't end up in jail—paid a lot of attention to their makeup and hair and clothes, trying look like Joan Crawford or Betty Grable even though they had pimples and chewed gum and tight skirts that hiked up behind and didn't get dry-cleaned enough. My sisters didn't look like that, they just looked sort of dull because they never had any money even for cheap new style clothes.

Antoinette looked like a couple of the teachers I had in grade school, and like one of the social workers that came to check out my folks when I was little. I thought at first that they looked a little dull too. It even took me a while to see they were young. They were pretty in a kind of plain way if you know what I mean. Like their clothes were not really dull, but more simple. They didn't wear flashy colors or pancake makeup or bleach their hair, and their skirts never seemed to wrinkle up. The guys used to call them dried up old maids, but little by little I started to think that the way they looked was high class, not cheap imitations of movie stars. Educated. Independent. Intelligent. That was the way Antoinette looked.

When she shook my hand, I felt like never letting go. I just stood there looking at her until she took her hand away, got up, went to the back, and called Mr. Mantella. They came back in and I couldn't keep my eyes off her. I could of stood there all day just watching her every move. Then Mr. Mantella said you got overalls? Good, get a shovel and get in the back of the truck, and we was off to a job.

When I think of Mantella's Plumbing, I always see that old calendar on the wall that was so faded you could hardly see the picture on it, a man on a horse, sort of like a Mexican cowboy but with long blonde hair and a white blanket over his shoulders, holding up a short sword, what Antoinette said they call a saber, and pointing it forward over the horses head. When I asked who that picture was, Antoinette didn't know, the other plumbers didn't know. Mr. Mantella knew. He said thats Garibaldi. I just looked dumb. He told me, great hero of Italy, my father always said, but nobody remembers him now. Mr. Mantella's father (he had just died, I never met him) used to tell stories about him, how men said his white poncho was bullet proof, and how all the women fell in love with him, and how he fought on land and on the sea, in South America and in Italy, and how men would follow him into battle anywhere, anytime. Then Mr. Mantella laughed and said maybe another story explains that one. His father told him Garibaldi used to say

that any man who turned from the enemy, Garibaldi would shoot him in the head. I never have to shoot more than one, Garibaldi would say.

(I don't know why I suddenly remember that story. Well—yes I do. I guess General Eisenhower must have read about Garibaldi and decided to do the same thing to me. I guess Eisenhower is a smart general, but I don't think it works that way anymore.)

It's not like Antoinette fell in love at first sight, just me. I could tell she liked me, but she had another boyfriend, and I was just out of Ionia, and she knew from Margaret that even if I was Polish like her, I didn't come from a family like hers. I had to prove myself. And I tried. When we was just back from a job and we had an hour to kill I'd hang around Mantella's Plumbing and sweep up a little. After I cleaned up the display windows once, Mr. Mantella put me in charge of dressing the windows. Another excuse to stay late—nothing back home but my folks drinking and fighting—and finally one night Antoinette let me walk her home. The next week she let me take her to a movie and we stopped for a sandwich and a beer after. But she kept telling me she was still engaged to this other guy, and she was five years older than me, and she wanted to make sure she didn't end up with a man who drank and threw money around and tried to tell her what to do, and didn't put her first before anything else in the world. She wanted a man who'd give her a nice apartment and decent furniture, and some day a home of her own like her folks had.

I tried hard to prove I could be that man. The drinking part was easy, more than one or two beers makes me sick, and I told her my folks drinking just made me sick too, and guys I used to know on the street are worse now, real falling down drunks. So, says Antoinette, then why don't you move? And she helped me find a room in Dearborn. Only thing I spent money on was my rent, the movies we went to, and the flowers I bought her every payday and put a little note in them, and Mr. Mantella would laugh and call me Romeo. But he said I did good work and plenty of it, and he gave me a raise.

I could see Antoinette liked me but she was still watching me. It was like being on parole with her too. Not that I ever wanted to do anything but what she wanted me to do. Whatever she asked, I couldn't wait to do it. My pleasure, I'd say and make a little bow and we'd laugh, and when I walked her home after a movie she let me kiss her goodnight, and let me hold her a little longer each time and a little closer. And let her lips loose so I could French her, but I never tried to go further because I had to show her how much I respected her and wanted to marry her. I asked her to marry me right away, and every time I kissed her I asked her again to make sure she took me serious and might finally drop the guy she was engaged to. She took such a long time doing it. Well what girl wouldn't? A felon with a ten year bad record.

But two things told me I was finally making headway. When I told her I was 4F, she made me take her to the draft board to check and make sure that was right. Then she asked for your address so she could write to you. She never showed me the letter you wrote back, but it must of been okay. Then she wanted to go with me to my parole officer. Then I'll make a decision, she says.

When we got there she talked like she already made the decision, and we was asking permission to get married. My parole officer was against it. She was five years older than me, she had more education and made more money. And I said to him, yes, Antoinette is better than me in every way, and your right, I'm lucky to marry a woman better than me who'll help make me better too, and then he asked didn't I think the man

should be stronger and guide the woman, and I said sure, but if he's not strong he ought to get himself a strong woman, if he can find one and she'll have him. Well, I'll let you know, he says.

It took a week, but we finally got a letter saying okay we could get married.

That was when she invited me to dinner with her folks. The first time, God's truth, I'm sitting at the table in a house owned by the people who live in it. If this was what Antoinette wanted I'd do anything—anything legal—to get it for her. And whatever else she wanted. Starting with the wedding, which had to be just right. It was already September, and it would take a couple of months to get her dress made and reserve a day for the church and send out invitations, and get a caterer for the reception at the Wisneuski house, because Antoinette didn't want her mother working her fingers to the bone to cook and serve a couple hundred people. That's right, a couple hundred.

But first Antoinette's folks invited my folks to dinner, and was I dreading that. But it went okay. You could see they could never be real friendly, but everyone was nice and polite, and that night we set the date, November 7, 1942.

Of course, Antoinette didn't think much of my folks, but I told her, I'm just as happy if we never see them again after the wedding. My mother hated Antoinette before she met her and even more after she met her, called her a cripple and a witch who wanted to run my whole life. I wanted to say, that's fine if she runs my life and doesn't let me wreck it like yours. I wanted to say, why don't you want me to have a better life than you? But I just said, see you at the wedding. Then I kept away from my folks, which was easy because I was busy working and getting ready for the wedding.

We had a couple of bad days when that priest at St. Barbara's told me I wasn't Catholic and we couldn't get married there. Truth is I panicked. I was ready to run away or kill myself or do anything not to make Antoinette leave her religion for my sake. See, Mr. Dimmick, it was my nerves again, like those times at Ionia when the guys would play a joke or get rough, and I would start shaking, so they would do something more, just for a laugh, to see me go to pieces and even cry, until they was bored and disgusted, and even you would say come on Eddie, be a man. But Antoinette understood me. She knew I was doing the best I could with my nerves, which were really getting a little better since I met her, and she squeezed my hands and she said, your not going anywhere because I won't let you go, hear, I'm going to hold on to you, so just wait a minute and let me figure this out. And she did, she found another Catholic church with a priest that fixed up the papers, so I could be a real Catholic officially and he could marry us right on schedule.

And what a wedding her folks gave us. I wish you could of come, but I understand that your a busy man, and Antoinette was happy you sent us such a nice card. We always talked about sending you a picture of our wedding with Antoinette in that white dress and veil and me in a tux, you wouldn't of known me, I even looked taller. But those pictures cost money and her folks already took a lot out of the bank to pay for the wedding, and we didn't even go on a honeymoon because we had to go right to work, to pay the rent for just a little basement apartment. Nice landlord couple above us, but our place was so small. We kept saying, as soon as we get a better place, we're going to invite Mr. Dimmick to dinner. But that was not to be.

Then came the best year of my life. Why? Because it was just an ordinary life. Normal life. Both of us working and going to the movies a couple times a week and

having dinner and a beer out. But the best of all was just staying home in the evenings and making love. Then we'd be making plans, then making love again, the happiest old married couple, happier when Antoinette got pregnant.

Then I made Antoinette really proud of me. I surprised her. I heard they were hiring at the DeSoto plant so I just went out there on my own and got a job that paid a lot more that Mr. Mantella could afford pay me. It was the war, I guess, so many guys in the army, so many jobs around for any 4F who wasn't crippled or crazy or a real crook. I was honest with the manager, like you told me to, I told him about Ionia, gave him the name of my parole officer. My parole officer told the manager I wasn't a crook, was never violent, so he took a chance on me.

We wanted to be just like everyone else in America, every decent person. We wanted children and a decent place to live in.

Then Antoinette lost the baby. That made getting nice things even more important, if you get my meaning. Antoinette had to feel happy, feel like trying again, like everything would turn out okay. We found a big duplex apartment and we picked out really nice furniture to buy on time so we could enjoy it right away. Sometimes I would surprise Antoinette with something, small or big, flowers or furniture I knew she wanted, like the time we came home and she found our new dining room set all moved in and put just where she wanted it.

All we had to do was sign for everything. My credit was good! We could just barely pay that rent and keep up the payments on the furniture, and on the car (which only Antoinette could drive because I was still on probation) but the two of us was working, and I just turned over my paycheck to Antoinette. That was what I needed and what I wanted, our beautiful home together, Antoinette managing everything, and maybe, as soon as we paid off the furniture, saving for a down payment on a house that we would own, our very own home. Then Antoinette thought she might be pregnant again.

One happy year in my whole life. It was all over on our first wedding anniversary, November 7, 1943. That was the same day the last of the new furniture came. My sister brought over a letter that had gone to our old address. It was from the draft board. I had been reclassified IA.

I thought it was a mistake. Everyone said the war was going to be over soon. The Americans had landed in Italy, and were bombing hell out of German cities, and the Germans were getting beat in Africa, and stuck in the snow in Russia, right? I wasn't very good at keeping up with the news, but that's what I heard. In the stockade Thaddeus explained it all to me, how even if I had read the newspapers, I wouldn't know what was really going on. The truth was our generals had got it all wrong. The Germans weren't giving up so easy and Americans were getting killed thousands at a time, tens of thousands, he said, and now, he said, they're scraping the bottom of the barrel, for replacements, that's us, not because we'd make good soldiers, they already know we won't. Cannon fodder, he called it. You must be the worst fighter in the world Eddie, but your okay for cannon fodder, you know what that is? Smart guy Thaddeus. Smart enough to not be cannon fodder, and only get the stockade until the war is over, he says, then about six months before they kick him out. He's been right about everything so far, so probably he's right about that. I thought I was being smart like him, I told him, and he just shook his head. Your too good to be smart, he said, too honest. So here's a guy who tells me that doing what you told me—be good, be honest—is stupid and that's what got

me here. So am I saying your wrong and he's right? No, Mr. D. Like I told Thaddeus, it wasn't about smart or stupid or good or bad or honest or—anything I do. It's luck. Lots of guys did the same as me and their going to live and go home to their wife and kids because they got lucky. Me, I've always been unlucky except when I met you and when I met Antoinette. Not much luck, and all used up before I'm twenty-five.

And yet. If I'd of been smart, I would of gone right out, soon as I got that draft notice, and hot wired some car, and drove it into a wall. Driving without a license, car theft, property damage. I would of been sent to jail for a year, with time off for good behavior, and by that time the war would of been over. That's what I should of done, but I was all mixed up. I guess I was thinking it would be terrible for me to show up again at Ionia, or even Jackson, still a crook, like you were wrong about me, and it might be worse if I told you the reason. Because other men are out there fighting for our country. I did just one thing on purpose—I didn't make my regular report to my probation officer, didn't report my change of address. I was kind of hoping they'd pick me up for that and put me in jail for a few weeks and classify me 4F again. But that didn't happen. Maybe my probation officer was too busy to notice me. So Antoinette and me just kept working hard making extra payments on the furniture and hoping something would make the army change their minds and not want me.

By Thanksgiving Antoinette was pretty sure she was pregnant again. We should of been thankful but we were too worried. If I had to go in the army, it would be hard enough for her to keep up the payments on the car and the furniture and the rent. If she got sick and couldn't work we would lose everything. And after the baby came how would she live and work and take care of the baby? And even if the war was over by then, how soon would they let me out? Questions and questions and no good answers, just worry and wait.

The day I bought our Christmas tree, I came home and found the Order to Report for Induction, January 3, 1944. We stayed home over Christmas and tried to make each other happy, but we just found new things to worry about. We had this new calendar with pictures of the Great Lakes, we was going to put up on New Years Eve, but I couldn't do it, couldn't stand to see that January 3 date staring me in the face.

The physical they gave me was a joke. I told them about how my legs ached and how I could barely put shoes on my feet, but they just nodded and kept on stamping the papers and pushing me on to the next doctor. My eyesight wasn't that good either. I said I wouldn't wear glasses, but that doctor didn't pay any attention, just passed me on to a head doctor, who talked to me about 2 minutes about did I hear voices, then stamped the papers. It was all over in about fifteen minutes. You'd have to be dead not to pass that exam. At the end they gave me a paper. January 24, be on the train to Camp Wolters, Texas for basic training. Later someone said I could of tried to get a deferment because of working in the DeSoto plant, but it was too late by then. That's when I should of stolen and wrecked a car, my last chance, but I was so mixed up. My only hope was, with my legs, for sure I would fail basic training. Seventeen weeks infantry training and they'd send me back home 4F again.

You don't know what it was like because you never was in the army, too young for the first one, too old for this one—though believe me I saw some guys at that induction center looked about your age. But they wouldn't pick you up when they started

scraping the bottom because you was doing important work trying to straighten out kids like me—and now Margaret writes to tell me my brother Ray is in Ionia, and I'm not surprised. The army ought to take him, he likes to fight.

In a way the army is a lot like Ionia but a lot worse. A lot of guys living and sleeping and eating together, and some of them scary guys. The army keeps you running, doing things, wearing you out. The officers never stop yelling at you, its just their job, probably nice guys underneath, and if you don't follow orders, their's punishment. And you never get enough sleep and the food is even worse than Ionia, good cuts of meat and all, but just ruined. I'd rather be in jail. At least you didn't yell at me all the time.

The biggest difference is you were trying to make us boys learn a trade and respect for the law and stop thinking tough and fighting over everything. In the army it's the opposite. They try to make you tough and they teach you how to clean and use a gun and shoot to kill. They give you a knife and make you tear up a dummy to practice tearing the guts out of a man. They push and yell at you all day and never let you have enough sleep, Thaddeus says, so you'll get mad and stay mad all the time, so you'll want to kill Germans. I got tired but I never got mad, and I didn't want to kill anybody.

I was rotten at everything but KP. I would stumble when they made us run or march for miles, my feet bleeding in those heavy boots, but every time I fell down they just pushed and kicked and made me get up and keep going. On the range I couldn't hit anything with my rifle, so they made me fire over and over again until I had a black eye and swollen face on the right side from the kickback. Then more marching, digging, climbing over high things and falling and hurting your hands and feet, and they still would make you get up and do it again. One guy fell off one of those walls we had to climb and jump over. He broke his leg, and I had to carry him to the hospital. Then gas mask drill. I was so scared and sick. I couldn't breathe. I thought I would die right there. The sergeant called me names, always yelling at me what a slimy worm I am. Funny—when I get something right, and he says, that's it soldier, I did feel a little proud.

Whenever they let me rest a little, I would start a letter to Antoinette, like talking to her, the only person I wanted to talk to, and at night the guys would sit playing cards and drinking beer and laughing at me for writing to her two or three times a day. I would call her on the phone too, but not often because it cost so much.

And all the time I was doing these things I was trying to get out. My CO was a nice guy and he told me how to fill out the right papers, and he kept asking did I tell Antoinette to contact the Red Cross and get a doctor to write a letter about her health? I called the Red Cross myself, and they wanted some papers from my draft board, so all the 17 weeks of basic training I'm filling out papers, and everyone is telling me, fine, you'll be out of here soon, but there's another paper we need, and Antoinette is doing the same thing. The difference is that the Red Cross lady wasn't so nice to her, didn't care that my allotment won't pay the rent and the furniture payments, and that Antoinette already lost our second baby and was feeling too sick to work, and maybe she was going to have to pawn her rings to pay the rent. The Red Cross lady told her she should let the store take back the furniture, give up our nice duplex, rent a room somewhere. Their's a war on, you know, says the Red Cross lady. That's what people say for anything mean they do. I remember that from when I was home. They could try to sell you rotten fruit, or steal a tool from right next to you on the line, or dump their garbage into your can, but catch them at it, and you get, Their's a war on, you know.

So I passed basic training the end of May and we was supposed to get a furlough home, but everyone else left and I was still there. The Red Cross said maybe my discharge was coming through and they were holding me for that. I waited and hoped and every day it didn't come and didn't come, and finally most of the guys I was trained with went home on furlough and then went overseas. And I was still there. A whole month. Then the word came—no discharge—two weeks furlough before you ship out. Train fare home was $35, and I didn't even have that. Antoinette borrowed it from her mother.

While I was home I did some plumbing work to pay her back. The rest of the time we just sat and hugged each other. Antoinette had two epileptic fits while I was there. First time I ever saw such a thing. She needed me to stay home and take care of her, but nobody cared. Their's a war on, you know. I sure got sick of hearing that. Those two weeks was like five minutes.

Antoinette did pawn her rings so I'd have some money in my pocket when I went to a camp in Maryland, then in New Jersey, where they told me I was going to be a replacement in the 28th division of something, and some college boy lieutenant gave a talk on the proud history of the 28th, that earned the name Iron Division in the 1918 war.

Thaddeus laughed (seems like everything I said to him in the stockade was a big joke to him). He said, I bet that guy never mentioned that the 28th was also called the Hard Luck Division getting ripped to shreds holding the line against the Germans who, according to the generals, weren't supposed to be able to attack but did and killed so many men that they needed even guys like me. Seven thousand of us scraped off the bottom of the barrel and shipped out on the Aquitania. Now I knew what cannon fodder means, it means being like those dummies they made us practice on with bayonets, or like those wooden dummies popping up on the rifle range. Just to use up German time and ammunition.

On board ship, I met another guy from Detroit, Johnny, and we became buddies. One night we're cleaning our rifles, down there in the hold where it smells like puke all the time from guys being seasick, and I said, I don't know why I'm cleaning this thing, I'm never going to fire it, and Johnny said I shouldn't let anyone hear me talk that way. Well, I guess it doesn't matter anymore who hears me say I never intended to fire my gun and I never did.

We had a couple days training in England, then they took us to France, to Normandy, in August right after the 28th landed at Omaha Beach. I don't know how much the censors let them put in the newspapers about this. I know they wouldn't put in pictures of what I saw, standing up with 40 other guys packed in a truck and riding through hell. I never seen anything like that road, all mud and snow and blood and dead horses and wrecked trucks, and dead men, some of them still sitting in the drivers seat with half their head shot off. Johnny and a couple of other guys threw up all the way, other guys was crying or covering their eyes. I just went stiff and cold like I was freezing to death, trying to keep my eyes shut, because you couldn't look in any direction without seeing arms and guts and heads and blood.

They told us get off the truck and start walking toward some little town, so Johnny and I set off. Then the shelling and shooting started again, and the sergeant yelled dig in. Johnny found a good place, and we each dug ourselves into a hole.

I stuck my head up only once after that. Guys wandering all over. Leaving the roads, heading across fields, dropping weapons on the way, stealing candy bars off of

dead bodies and potatoes out of the ground, clothes off dead civilians. I just want you to know, Mr. D that lots of guys were as scared as me, and really deserted the army, uniform and all, trying to get away and stay alive anyway they could. I bet you never read about that in the newspapers, only about Our Brave Boys and all the heroes. Anyway, that's all I read in the newspapers just before they put me on that ship, when all this was starting. So even if I disgraced Ionia and dissappointed you, it wasn't only me ran away.

Next day we came up out of our holes, everyone was gone, left without us. We never did hear the order to dig out. After a while we heard some shots, but it turned out to be a Canadian unit. They let us join up with them for about 7 weeks. That was a good 7 weeks with them, nice guys. I tried to help them and any of the civilians we bumped into. Somebody said I should have been with the Red Cross or the Quakers because I was a helpful guy, even nice to that German soldier some guys wanted to kill. Why? He was just a scared kid. Younger than me. Scared like me.

We sent up messages to our unit to tell where we were, all legal, but just like a lot of other guys floating around those farms, we didn't try very hard to find them. So we missed marching in the big victory parade through Paris. Victory. That means the war is over, right? But it wasn't. Not yet. Tomorrow? Next week?

Trouble is, didn't anybody tell the Germans they lost the war? We kept getting stories from guys who ran away from another bloody battle and another and another. They were coming through camps and towns, and if they ran into an officer, said, okay, I'm a deserter, arrest me. One of them (I met him again with Thaddeus in the stockade) said he figured he was happy if they'd just put him in the stockade where no one is shooting at him. Then they'd court-martial him, guilty, sentence him to life or twenty years or death, keep him in jail. Pretty soon the war is over, and he's still alive, just locked up a few months. Then they let him go with a bad conduct discharge. I mean, he said to me, did you ever hear of any American soldier get hung for desertion? Army don't even want to admit all of us don't want to be Gary Cooper jumping out of trenches and yelling Geronimo. He was a funny guy, always joking, but he just made me more nervous.

It kept going like that. One day everything would be quiet and the farmers in the next village were digging like there was no war, and the next day the roads would be full of wagons and people with bundles, and bloody American soldiers telling how their whole platoon was wiped out by German Luftwaffe. Then another quiet day, and then more blood and guts and arms and legs in the snow.

There was one Canadian guy carried a little book of English poems in his pack, and sometimes, when the bombing and shelling had me shaking again, he would read poems out loud to calm him and me down. He read a couple of really sad ones by a famous English guy who was an officer in the first world war. And this guy tells me that this poet went on leave to England and said he wouldn't go back to fight in France anymore, the whole war was stupid, and he wasn't going to shoot anyone. He didn't get hung because he had a lot of rich and famous friends who had him put in a loony bin for a few months, then talked him into going back just about when the Germans started to negotiate peace. But this time, this war, there was no negotiating peace, right? Roosevelt says unconditional surrender, right? And those crazy Germans won't surrender. They just keep killing us.

By that time I made up my mind. I figured it this way. I know I can do jail. I had plenty of practice doing jail. I learned the rules there, how to keep out of fights and killings. But I couldn't do army, which is fighting and killing. Like I told Johnny, I start to shake if you tell me to point my rifle at someone—and shooting? You know, Mr. D, how any loud noise shakes me up so you can imagine what shape I was in by this time.

We rejoined our unit on October 5. I figured they'd arrest us for desertion and put us in the stockade, but they didn't. Johnny said what everybody else always said, we got lost and left behind and had been trying to catch up, and the officer (he was the third one since we left, the others got killed) didn't ask any questions, just nodded, then assigned us to the 4th platoon, going up to the line next day. I tried to tell him I couldn't, I was no good to him or the platoon, and if I had to go out their again I'd run away, but he wasn't even listening, I couldn't get him to arrest me, so I asked him, if I leave again now will it be desertion, and he said yes. So I started walking. Johnny tried to stop me, said I'd get in trouble, but I told him I know what I'm doing. I really thought I did. I figured what worked for hundreds of other guys should work for me too, but that was a mistake, like the hard luck outfit I was in, I was a hard luck guy.

I went a little way then borrowed a sheet of paper from one of the cooks. I sat down and wrote how I ran away before and I would run away again. I got 2 soldiers to sign as witnesses, then I gave it to the Colonel. He didn't want to take it, kept saying over and over again—don't put anything in writing.

I guess that was good advice. I think they thought I was trying to act smart. I guess I was, but I mean smart in a good way. Two good ways. Number One. The way you taught me—always tell the truth. Number two, what worked for these guys in the stockade with me. Get get put in the stockade, get court-marshaled, get sentenced, and—like they said—stay there a few months till the war was over and they throw you out.

Their was officers who came in still trying to talk me out of it, ready to tear up the confession I wrote if I would just go up to the line. Didn't I care about being called a coward? a jail-bird? a fairy? un-American? a no-good?(They didn't know I been called that all my life.) losing all my GI benefits? spending years in jail? even executed? But you could see they didn't believe that. I could always tell when they was winding up. They'd say, you're a nice kid Eddie. Then they'd screw their face up tough and say, a man who don't want to serve his country don't deserve to live. And I would say, I want to serve my country anywhere but up there.

So they finally put me in the stockade. They made me talk to a shrink for about five minutes. I told him the government knew I would be a rotten soldier, classified me 4F, and I never did anything to change their minds. I'd wait for guys to come back after court martial. They'd be smiling, shaking hands like they won a prize saying, 20 years, great, do a few months, maybe a year, when the war is over. I could hardly wait to get it over with. So I could stop worrying. Because I worry so much even when I'm sure I did the smart thing.

My court martial was on November 11, 1944. Armistice Day, the day we always had off school or work to celebrate the end of the war to end all wars. The whole thing took about 45 minutes. I didn't say anything. I couldn't if I wanted to, standing there in front of nine or ten officers, you know me, how I would freeze up if a super at Ionia even said, nice weather we're having. I figured the court martial was pretty cut and dried like

all the others and these officers didn't want to waste a lot of time listening to me. They took me back to the stockade, then sent me a paper. Verdict: guilty. Sentence: death.

That was not the way it was supposed to work. That was a real shock, but a couple of the guys who got 20 years said I shouldn't worry about it. A lot of guys—maybe 20 or 30 deserters—got the death penalty, but nobody got killed. Once in a while the army executed some American soldier for raping a little French kid or killing some guy, but they never executed anyone for desertion. Never had, back as far as anyone could remember, not even in the last war, not in the one before that in Cuba. But just to make sure, I should write to General Eisenhower and ask for clemency. And don't be too honest this time, give a little, tell him you'll go up the line if he wants. So I did. I told him how sorry I was and how I knew I had been a pretty worthless kid, but now I had a good wife and was trying hard the last few years to be a good citizen, and I wished I been a better soldier, but I would try to be if he would give me mercy.

I don't know if he ever read it. I guess he was pretty busy. This was December, when the Germans attacked again and fighting got so bad whole units were being pinned down or wiped out, and guys came into the stockade off the lines saying no one was moving except guys running into the woods to hide and maybe freeze to death. All I know is some officer told me General Eisenhower signed some form to move my case on to the routine final review before execution.

It took about a month for them until the order came—put me in front of a firing squad. They just had to figure out how and where they wanted to do it. I couldn't believe it. You'd think, I said to Thaddeus, they had more important things than me to think about right now. For once Thaddeus didn't laugh at me. Next few days we had some long talks—the MPs left us alone because I think they felt sorry for me.

I don't have a lot of time now Mr. D so I guess I'll just sum up what we each said.

Thaddeus said I was dying like so many other guys died because the generals were so stupid. Starting with MacArthur in the Pacific, pulling out and letting guys die on those godforsaken islands, all the way up to Eisenhower not being ready for the German attack so that everything fell apart. (That's the way Thaddeus talks, no respect.) Desertions were getting to be as high as casualties and Eisenhower had to do something about the mess he made, and that meant, Thaddeus said, blame someone else, kill someone, make an example of someone. Maybe Ike thought an execution would put the fear of God into everyone else who was ready to run away from the lines. I was unlucky, he said, because so many thousands of guys had already done just the same as I was doing, so they come up with this stupid idea. It was like drawing straws, and I drew the short straw.

No, I told Thaddeus, they didn't even let me draw, just handed me the short straw. They looked at my record, in and out of jail since I was 12. If we have to kill one to make an example, then Eddie Slovik is the one, not much lost if we kill Eddie. So I'm going to be shot for the bread and cakes I stole when I was 12. Thaddeus gives me this surprised look, you know the way people look at you when you say something that shows your not as stupid as they always thought. Well, no, I'm sure no one ever looked at you that way, Mr. D, but I been getting that look all my life, the look that says, Eddie, your stupid, but I'll be patient and listen even if I know already what your going to say and how dumb it'll be.

I never got that look from you, Mr. D, you always made me feel I could be one of the guys who listened to the right people and learned to do the right things. That's what I was doing for that whole year after I got out of Ionia, and I could of gone on doing it if they left me alone. That's why I want you to know you didn't fail with me. You did all the right things but had no luck with me, like you caught some of my bad luck.

After the final order came down from General Eisenhower, they had to figure out how to kill me. That's when it starts to get weird. First of all, their not going to hang me because its more dignified to shoot me. But where?

In the town square of some French village like they did in olden times? No, they didn't want the French people to know that the U.S. army even noticed the way Americans were running off and hiding on farms and being dragged away by M.Ps. They had to act like most American soldiers were so brave, it wasn't a problem.

Maybe at a US army post with a regiment standing at attention, watching, so they can spread the word to the other guys—stay on the line or we shoot you ourselves? No, because how can they stop guys from writing home about it, and if even one letter gets past the censor, what does that do to all the stories of our brave boys, not to mention the news might encourage the Germans to keep fighting to the last man. So if their trying to make an example of me, so guys will keep going up the line to fight, it sure seems weird that all of a sudden their trying to keep people from knowing what their doing to me.

They put shackles on my arms and legs like I'm a mad killer and put me in the back of a jeep. I don't know where we're going. 2 MPs drive me all night long through a snow storm. On the way, when they stop to let me get out and pee, I tell them, look guys, just loosen my leg chains enough so I can start to run. In this snow, I'll get about ten feet, then you shoot me, and it's all over, less trouble.

They got real upset. Please Eddie, don't make this harder for us and harder for you. So I shut up. I sit in back and think how Thaddeus and the other guys in the stockade looked more and more upset, and these MPs are getting more and more nervous. But me—with my bad nerves—I'm getting calm, more calm than I ever been since they took me out of my beautiful home away from my beautiful Antoinette. How can that be when I know for sure I'll never see her again?

Maybe that's it. I know for sure. It's not knowing for sure that tears me up inside. Not knowing if a bomb is going to blow my head off right now, or in the next minute, or the next or the next, not knowing for hours and days if the next minute, I'm going to be screaming and watching my guts pour out. Or maybe the next minute, or the next, forever and ever, until its over. I'm dead. When I knew for sure how and when I was going to be killed I just got more and more calm. Crazy, huh?

Before dawn we finally come to this empty house owned by some rich French family that went south to get away from the fighting. This place is past the town, off all by itself with high stone walls around a courtyard so no Frenchmen are going to know I'm being shot down by a firing squad.

When I get here Father Cummings gives me a stack of letters from Antoinette to read, while he goes out to give counsel to the dozen guys assigned to the firing squad. Because they are really upset. So I said, tell the guys its okay, just shoot straight so I don't suffer. And his priest face—you know what I mean—slips for a minute and he looks worried, but then puts the face back on. He introduces me to this Methodist minister who says he'll stay with me till Father Cummings comes back. But I tell him

never mind, just get me some more paper please so I can finish this letter. So he walks out too, and when he passes Father Cummings he says, under his breath, like he thinks I can't hear, which of us is Herod and which of us is Pontius Pilate? I don't get the joke because I never read the Bible, but it didn't seem mean.

I can tell from reading Antoinette's letters, the last one for Christmas, that she doesn't have any idea about what's going on! I'm arrested October 9 and her last letter is dated December 10, 1944. More than two months went by and no one told her about my court martial, and the verdict on November 11. Their supposed to always notify the family first, before anything happens, but this time nobody in the states knows about this. Well, it's not headlines what happens to Eddie Slovik in this war, but I thought the reason they are shooting me was to stop all these guys from doing what I did. So what is the point?

You know what I think? From what I see here—I got about another hour if they keep on schedule—nobody wants to do it, and I bet, after they do it, nobody will want to talk about it. It was like one of those good ideas that turns out to be a bad idea, but nobody knows how to admit it's a mistake and stop it. It's getting kind of funny how they look so miserable that I have to try to cheer them up. Don't feel bad, I tell them, I'm okay with this, not your fault, no hard feelings. I smile and say, look, I'm just getting shot for that candy I stole when I was twelve. I can't help saying that to one and another. I like that little look of surprise every time. Surprised by respect for stupid Eddie. Because all at once they know I'm not too stupid to see the truth and say it. In a few short words, not a whole book someone like Thaddeus could write. A few guys will remember those words if they remember me at all.

You'd be proud of me. I must be the calmest man here. Here where it's quiet and it's all certain and guys act like we're in church, and Father Cummings is back now and already saying Hail Marys while I'm finishing this up.

One favor, Mr. D. If you have time, go and visit Antoinette. Not to show her this letter, it might upset her, but if anyone's been telling her I died a coward, tell her they was wrong. Tell her I stayed calm by thinking about her, and the best year of my life, the year I had with her. The year she changed my luck for a while.

Very truly yours,
Eddie Slovik

Eddie's last request—for a quick death—was not to be granted. The firing squad, made up of twelve expert marksmen, was apparently so unnerved that, while all their bullets hit Eddie, none pierced his heart. Tied to a post, he slumped forward as far as the ropes holding him would allow. Twice his head jerked upward, then fell again while an army doctor held a stethoscope to his chest. The squad was ordered to reload. While they were preparing to fire another volley—a delay of about fifteen minutes—Eddie Slovik's heart stopped, and he was pronounced dead.

Antoinette Slovik did not learn the circumstances of Eddie's death until 1953, when William Bradford Huie interviewed her for his revelatory THE EXECUTION OF PRIVATE SLOVIK (1954) the primary source for this story. No explanation had been given for the refusal of the government to pay her the life insurance all soldiers carried in

World War II—only a vague statement about "dishonorable" circumstances surrounding Eddie's death. Huie did not find anyone else—except officers directly connected to the trial and execution—who knew Eddie Slovik had been shot by American soldiers under orders, the only American soldier executed for desertion since 1855.

Huie's book (reissued by Westholme Publishing 2002) offers the following statistics about the World War II American army:

12% of draftees were exempted because of mental disability

Of the 10 million inducted, 2.5 million were trained for ground combat

Of these 2.5 million, up to 1 million escaped combat by means of bad or criminal conduct, self-wounding, mental breakdown, and (40,000) by desertion

2800 men were tried for desertion, 29 condemned to death, one executed.

References

William Bradford Huie *The Execution of Private Slovik (1954)*

Film starring Martin Sheen *The Execution of Private Slovik (1974)*