

Twenty-four Hunted

AFTER A DAY SPENT SHIVERING IN OMORI'S QUARANTINE area, Louie was led into the main body of the camp, an enormous compound crowded with some nine hundred prisoners. He wandered down a long row of barracks until he found the one to which he was assigned. As he walked in, several POWs came forward to greet him. One of them slipped a cup of piping hot tea into his chilled hands. A Scottish prisoner approached, carrying a spoon and a bulging sock. He dipped the spoon into the sock and ladled out two heaping teaspoons of sugar into Louie's cup. To any POW, sugar was a treasure of incalculable value, and Louie couldn't understand how this man could have acquired an entire sock full of it.

As he sipped his tea, Louie was introduced to two barracks commanders, British lieutenant Tom Wade and American lieutenant Bob Martindale, who began filling him in on Omori. They spoke about the corporal who had attacked him at the gate. His name was Watanabe, they said, but Louie should never refer to him by his real name. Such was Watanabe's paranoia that he often hid outside the barracks, trying to catch men speaking of him so he could beat them for it. The men referred to him by a host of nicknames, including the Animal, the Big Flag, Little Napoleon, and, most often, the Bird, a name chosen because it carried no negative connotation that could get the POWs beaten.

It was the Bird's favorite pastime to send guards bursting into a barracks ahead of him, screaming Keirei! He would then race in to choose his victim. Sitting far from the door didn't ensure safety; the Bird loved to leap through open windows. Men were told to always be ready, speak of him only in whispers, and agree in advance on a subject to switch to if the Bird ran into the room demanding to be told what they were talking about. Men were advised to say that they were speaking of sex, because the subject interested and distracted him.

The Omori barracks were arranged in two lines separated by a central avenue. At the avenue's end stood the Bird's office, placed so that the corporal could see the entire avenue through his large front window. To get anywhere in camp, other than the benjos behind the barracks, POWs had to step into the Bird's view. One of his demands was that men salute not only him but his window. He often left the office vacant and hid nearby, baseball bat in hand, ready to club men who failed to salute the window.

Among the POWs, there was an elaborate sentry system to monitor the Bird's movements. When he was in his office, men would say, "The Animal is in his cage." When he was out, they'd say, "The Animal is on the prowl." "Flag's up!" meant that the Bird was coming. Men were so attuned to the Bird's presence that they instantly recognized the clapping sound his clogs made in the sand. The sound usually triggered a stampede to the benjos, where the Bird seldom went.

As he absorbed the advice on coping with the Bird, Louie learned something else that surely sank his heart. He had thought that since this was a POW camp, he would be able to write home to let his family know he was alive. Once, Omori POWs had been allowed to write letters, but no longer. The Bird didn't allow it.

When new POWs arrived at Omori, they were registered with the Red Cross, and word of their whereabouts was forwarded to their governments, then their families. But Omori officials didn't register Louie. They had special plans for him, and were apparently hiding him. In the absence of Louie's name on a Red Cross roster, the American government had no reason to believe that he was alive, and Louie's family was told nothing.

For Louie, the shared lessons about the Bird did no good. No sooner had Louie stepped outside than the Bird found him, accused him of an imaginary infraction, and attacked him in a wild fury. The next day came another beating, and the next, another. Though there were hundreds of POWs in camp, this deranged corporal was fixated on Louie, hunting the former Olympian, whom he would call “number one prisoner.” Louie tried to conceal himself in groups of men, but the Bird always found him. “After the first few days in camp,” Louie said, “I looked for him like I was looking for a lion loose in the jungle.” ——

When Louie woke each morning, the first thing that he thought of was the Bird. He’d look for the corporal through morning tenko, roll call, farting at the emperor, and forcing down rations. After breakfast, the enlisted men were assembled into work parties and marched away. With the camp population drastically diminished by the exodus, Louie had no crowds to hide in. The Bird was on him immediately.

The one good thing about being an officer in Omori was that one was exempt from slave labor, albeit at the painful cost of half of the standard ration. But soon after Louie’s arrival, the Bird called out the officers and announced that from now on, they’d labor at the work sites alongside the enlisted men. When a man protested that this violated international law, the Bird swung his kendo stick straight into the man’s head. The Bird approached the next man, who also said he wouldn’t work. Again the kendo stick banged down. Louie was the third man. Trying to avoid getting his head cracked open, he blurted out a compromise idea. They’d love to work within the camp, he said, making it a better place.

The Bird paused. He seemed to feel that as long as he forced the officers to work, he was winning. He sent them into a shack and ordered them to stitch up leather ammunition pouches, backpacks, and equipment covers for the Japanese military. Louie and the other men were kept there for about eight hours a day, but they worked only when the Bird was around, and even then, they deliberately stitched the leather improperly.

The Bird’s next move was to announce that from now on, the officers would empty the benjos. Eight benjos were no match for nine hundred dysenteric men, and keeping the pits from oozing over was a tall order. Louie and the other officers used “honey dippers”—giant ladles—to spoon waste from the pits into buckets, then carried the buckets to cesspits outside the camp. The work was nauseating and degrading, and when heavy rains came, the waste oozed out of the cesspits and back into camp. To deprive the Bird of the pleasure of seeing them miserable, the men made a point of being jolly. Martindale created the “Royal Order of the Benjo.” “The motto,” he wrote, “was unprintable.” ——

As the officers finished each day of abuse, honey-dipping, and errant sewing, the enlisted slaves were driven back to camp. The first time Louie saw them return, he learned where that sock of sugar had come from.

At the work sites, Omori’s POWs were waging a guerrilla war. At the railyards and docks, they switched mailing labels, rewrote delivery addresses, and changed the labeling on boxcars, sending tons of goods to the wrong destinations. They threw fistfuls of dirt into gas tanks and broke anything mechanical that passed through their hands. Forced to build engine blocks, American Milton McMullen crafted the exteriors well enough to pass inspection but fashioned the interiors so the engines would never run. POWs loading at docks “accidentally” dropped fragile items, including a large shipment of wine and furniture en route to a Nazi ambassador. (The broken furniture was sent on; the wine was decanted into POW canteen s.)

Coming upon the suitcases of the German envoy, POWs shredded the clothes, soaked them in mud and oil, and repacked them with friendly notes signed "Winston Churchill." They drank huge quantities of tea and peed profusely on nearly every bag of rice they loaded. And in one celebrated incident, POWs loading heavy goods onto a barge hurled the material down with such force that they sank the barge, blocking a canal. After a Herculean effort was put into clearing the sunken barge and bringing in a new one, the POWs sank it, too.

Emboldened by the thought that he was probably going to die in Japan and, thus, had nothing to lose, McMullen joined several other POWs in committing an act that was potentially suicidal. While enslaved at a railyard, they noticed that a group of track workers had neglected to put their tools away. When their guard became absorbed in wooing a pretty girl, the POWs sprinted from their stations, snatched up the tools, dashed over to a section of track, wrenched the pins and bolts out, and rushed back to their work. The guard, still talking to the girl, noticed nothing. A switch engine chugged in, pulling several boxcars. The engine hit the sabotaged strip, the rails shot out from under it, and the entire train tipped over. No one was hurt, but the Japanese were frantic. They looked to the POWs, who kept working, their faces devoid of expression. The Japanese began screaming accusations at one another.

As dangerous as these acts were, for the POWs, they were transformative. In risking their necks to sabotage their enemy, the men were no longer passive captives. They were soldiers again.

What the POWs couldn't sabotage, they stole. They broke into shipping boxes, tapped bottles, lifted storage room doors off their hinges, raided ships' galleys, and crawled up factory chutes. Scottish POWs who worked in the Mitsubishi food warehouse ran the most sophisticated operation. When the Japanese took their shoe sizes for work boots, the men asked for boots several sizes too big. They knitted special socks, some four feet long, and hoarded hollow bamboo reeds. Once at the sites, they leaned casually against sugar sacks, stabbed the reeds in, then ran the reeds into the socks, allowing sugar to pour through the reeds until the socks were full. Others tied up their pant cuffs, stuck the reeds in their waistbands, and filled their pants with sugar. Each load was deposited in a secret compartment in the latrine, to be retrieved at day's end.

Each evening, Louie saw the slaves tramping back in, their clothes packed with booty. The critical moment came when inspection was called. Men would deftly pass contraband, or the men bearing it, around during the searches, while the guards' backs were turned. McMullen would hide fish in his sleeves; when patted down, he'd hold his arms up and grip the fish tails so they wouldn't slide out. The biggest trick was hiding the POWs who arrived fall-down drunk after chugging down any alcohol that they couldn't smuggle. The drunken men were shuffled into the center of the lineup, their shoulders pinched between the shoulders of sober men, so that they wouldn't pitch face forward into the guards.

When the men were safely in the barracks, Louie watched them unpack themselves. Under the men's clothes, sugar-filled socks hung from necks or arms, dangled under armpits and down pant legs, in the necks of turtleneck sweaters, in false pockets, under hats. Two-foot-long salmon would emerge from under shirts. Louie once saw a thief pull three cans of oysters from a single boot. Legs would be swaddled in tobacco leaves. One American built a secret compartment in his canteen, filling the bottom with stolen alcohol while the top, upon inspection, yielded only water.

Men were caught all the time, and when they were, all the men of the work party were beaten with fists, bats, and rifle butts. But the men were fed so little and worked so hard that they felt they had to steal to survive. They set up a “University of Thievery,” in which “professors”—the most adept thieves—taught the art of stealing. The final exam was a heist. When men were caught stealing, POW officers suggested that the culprits be transferred to sites that didn’t carry food. The Japanese agreed, and the POW officers then replaced the inept thieves with University of Thievery alumni.

Though Louie, as an officer, had no opportunity to steal, he was quickly integrated into the thieving system, rolling tobacco leaves for drying and putting them up in secret “wall safes” to cure. Once the leaves were properly aged, Louie would return to shave them into smokable shreds.

Thanks to the stealing, a black market with a remarkable diversity of goods flourished in camp. One group stole all the ingredients for a cake, only to discover, upon baking it, that the flour was actually cement. Because there were so many men, there wasn’t a lot of loot to go around, but everyone benefited in some way. Whenever the thieves had something extra, they gave it to Louie, who still wasn’t managing to gain weight. A few times, they even smuggled him smoked oysters. Louie devoured them and tiptoed to the fence to pitch the cans into Tokyo Bay.

Stolen food, especially the Scots’ sugar, was the camp currency, and the “sugar barons” became the rich men of Omori, even hiring assistants to do their laundry. The Scots drove hard bargains, but they also donated one-quarter of the loot to sick POWs. One night, when he found Frank Tinker deathly ill, Louie waited for the guards to pass, snuck to the Scots’ barracks, and told them that Tinker was in trouble. The Scots sent Louie back to Tinker with a load of sugar, no charge. Tinker would later say that Louie’s sugar run “saved my soul.” According to Martindale, Tinker wasn’t the only man saved. Deaths from illness and malnutrition had once been commonplace, but after the thievery school was created, only two POWs died, one from a burst appendix. And in a place predicated on degradation, stealing from the enemy won back the men’s dignity. —

As the weeks passed, the Bird didn’t relent in his attacks on Louie. The corporal sprang upon him randomly, every day, pounding his face and head. Any resistance from Louie, even shielding his face, would inspire the Bird to more violence. Louie could do nothing but stand there, staggering, as the Bird struck him. He couldn’t understand the corporal’s fixation on him, and was desperate for someone to save him.

During one of the Bird’s attacks, Louie saw the camp commander, Kaname Sakaba, step out of his office and look toward him. Louie felt relief, thinking that now that Sakaba had seen this abuse of a POW by a lowly corporal, here at a show camp, he’d put a stop to it. But Sakaba watched indifferently, then walked back inside. Subsequent beatings, of Louie and of others, were no different. Other Japanese officers watched, some looking on approvingly, others looking dismayed. Sometimes, when they issued orders, they allowed the Bird, a mere corporal, to overrule them right to their faces.

According to camp accountant Yuichi Hatto, this strange situation was the result of a wrinkle in rank. Sakaba was ravenous for promotion. The appearance of order in his camp and the productivity of its slaves furthered his interests, and Watanabe’s brutality was his instrument. While it is unknown whether Sakaba ordered Watanabe to abuse POWs, he obviously approved. According to Hatto, some camp employees were offended by Watanabe’s treatment

of POWs, but because those acts pleased Sakaba, the Bird was untouchable, even by those who outranked him. In consequence, the Bird flaunted his impunity and virtually ran the camp. He viewed the POWs as his possessions, and he sometimes attacked other Japanese who interacted with them. Watanabe was, said Hatto, “not a mere guard, but an absolute monarch of POWs at Omori.”

Some Japanese, including Hatto, tried to help POWs behind Watanabe’s back. No one did more than Private Yukichi Kano, the camp interpreter. When sick men were taken off work duty, losing half their rations, Kano found them easy jobs to keep them officially “at work” so they could eat enough to get well. When he saw prisoners violating the rules by eating vegetables in the garden area, or pocketing mussels at low tide outside the camp, he talked the guards into looking the other way. In winter, he hung blankets along the infirmary walls and scrounged up charcoal to heat the rooms. He snuck sick men away from the sadistic Japanese doctor and into the hands of a POW who was a physician. “There was a far braver man than I,” wrote POW Pappy Boyington, winner of the Medal of Honor. Kano’s “heart was being torn out most of the time, a combination of pity for the ignorance and brutality of some of his own countrymen and a complete understanding of the suffering of the prisoners.” But for Louie, the Bird’s pet project, Kano could do nothing.

When Louie saw Red Cross officials being taken on a carefully staged tour of camp, he thought that help had finally arrived. But to his dismay, the Bird tailed the officials and stood by, listening intently, as POWs answered the officials’ questions about life in camp. No POW was foolish enough to answer truthfully, knowing the retribution that would follow. Louie had no choice but to keep his mouth shut.

Louie was on his own. As the attacks continued, he became increasingly angry. His experience in childhood, when bullies had sent him home bloody every day, was repeating itself. His interior world lit up with rage, and he couldn’t hide it.

Each time the Bird lunged for him, Louie found his hands drawing into fists. As each punch struck him, he imagined himself strangling the Bird. The Bird demanded that Louie look him in the face; Louie wouldn’t do it. The Bird tried to knock Louie down; Louie wobbled but wouldn’t fall. In his peripheral vision, he could see the Bird looking furiously at his clenched fists. Other prisoners warned Louie that he had to show deference or the Bird would never stop. Louie couldn’t do it. When he raised his eyes, all that shone in them was hate. To Watanabe, whose life was consumed with forcing men into submission, Louie’s defiance was an intolerable, personal offense.

More and more now, the POWs could hear air-raid sirens echoing across the bay, from Tokyo. They were all false alarms, but they raised the prisoners’ hope. Louie searched the empty sky and hoped that the bombers would come before the Bird put an end to him. —

At half past six Greenwich mean time on Wednesday, October 18, 1944, a program called Postman Calls began its evening airing on Radio Tokyo. It was one of twelve propaganda programs conducted in English and broadcast to Allied troops. The broadcasters were POWs known as “propaganda prisoners,” usually working under threat of execution or beating.

This evening, the program made an announcement: “This is the postman calling California and Mrs. Louise Zamperini, 2028 Gramercy Street, Torrance, California. Here is a

message from her son, First Lieutenant Louis Silvie Zamperini, now interned in the Tokyo camp. 'My darling family, I am uninjured and in good health. I miss you all tremendously and dream of you often. Praying that you are all in good health and hope to see you again someday. Love to all relatives and friends. Hold my belongings and money for me. Love, Louis.' "

A few miles away at Omori, Louie knew nothing of the broadcast. The Japanese had written it themselves or forced a propaganda prisoner to do so.

The broadcast wasn't aired in America, but in the town of Claremont, South Africa, a man named E. H. Stephan either picked up the signal on shortwave radio or received a report of it. Stephan worked for a service that monitored broadcasts and sent news of POWs to family members. He filled out a card with information about the broadcast. Louie, the card said, was a POW in an Axis camp.

Stephan stapled a transcript of the radio message to the card. He addressed it using the contact information typed in the message, misunderstood as Louise Vancerini, 2028 Brammersee Street, Terence, California. He dropped the card in the mail.

Thanks to the mistaken address and the severe delays of the wartime mail, the card would wander the world for months. In January 1945, it would turn up in Trona, a crossroads in the California desert. It would be the end of January, nearly three and a half months after the broadcast, when someone in Trona would pick up the letter, scribble try Torrance on the outside, and mail it on.

Twenty-five

"B-29"

ON ONE OF THE LAST DAYS OF OCTOBER 1944, LOUIE pushed a wheelbarrow over the Omori bridge, through the village at the bridge's end, and into Tokyo. With him were another POW and a guard; they'd been ordered to pick up meat for the POW rations. Louie had been in Japan for thirteen months, but this was the first time that he had passed, unblindfolded, into the society that held him captive.

Tokyo was bled dry. There were no young men anywhere. The war had caused massive shortages in food and goods, and the markets and restaurants were shuttered. The civilians were slipshod and unbathed. Everyone knew that the Americans were coming, and the city

seemed to be holding its breath. Teams of children and teenagers were shoveling out slit trenches and tearing down buildings to make firebreaks.

Louie, the other POW, and the guard arrived at a slaughterhouse, where their wheelbarrow was filled with horse meat. As they pushed it back toward Omori, Louie looked up at a building and saw graffiti scrawled over one wall. It said, B Niju Ku. The first character was simple enough, the English letter B. Louie knew that niju meant twenty and ku meant nine, though he didn't know that ku carried another meaning: pain, calamity, affliction. Louie walked the wheelbarrow into Omori, wondering what "B twenty-nine" referred to, and why someone would write it on a wall. —

At ten minutes to six on the morning of November 1, 1944, a wondrous American plane lifted off a runway on Saipan. Its size boggled the imagination: 99 feet long, 141 feet from wingtip to wingtip, almost 30 feet high at the tail, and weighing 120,000 pounds or more loaded, it dwarfed the famously huge B-24. Powered by four 2,200-horsepower engines—each engine almost twice as powerful as each of those of the B-24—it could rocket across the sky at up to 358 miles per hour and carry giant bomb loads. A B-24 didn't have a prayer of making it from Saipan to Japan's home islands and back. This plane could do it. It was the B-29 Superfortress, and it would bring down Japan.

The bomber, soon to be named Tokyo Rose as a mocking homage to the women who broadcast Japanese propaganda, was piloted by Captain Ralph Steakley. That morning, he flew his plane north. The plane split the air nearly six miles up. Above was a sky of intense blue; below, sliding over the horizon, came Japan.

B-29s had been used a handful of times over Japan, in raids launched from China, beginning four and a half months earlier. Largely because of the difficulty of supplying the Chinese bases and flying the vast distances between those bases and Japan, the missions had been ineffective. But to the Japanese, the swift leviathans were terrifying, inspiring the graffiti that Louie had seen. Three weeks after the first China-based raid, Saipan had been captured, and American plans had shifted to launching B-29s from there. Steakley's was the first run from Saipan to Tokyo, which hadn't seen an American plane since the Doolittle raid in 1942. His plane carried not bombs but cameras: Steakley was mapping the path for the B-29s that would follow his. At noon, the plane reached the city.

Louie was standing in a group of POWs, doing calisthenics on the orders of the guards, when a siren began sounding. The guards, as usual during alerts, shooed the men into the barracks. The POWs were used to the sirens, which had always been false alarms, so the alert caused little concern.

In the barracks, the men peered out the windows. Something was different; the guards were gaping at the sky as if, wrote Bob Martindale, "they were looking for the Messiah." Then there was a glint above, a finger pointing urgently, and a crush of POWs bolting for the door. Running into the compound with his face skyward, Louie saw a sliver of radiant white light high over Tokyo, contrails curling behind it like twisting spines. "Oh God, God, an American plane!" someone shouted. The guards looked stricken. Martindale heard them speaking to each other in high agitation. One phrase stood out: "B niju ku."

Louie, like all the POWs, had no idea what kind of plane this was. Then a POW who'd just been captured said that it was a new American bomber called a B-29. A cheer rang out.

Men began shouting, "B-29! B-29!" The bomber was the most beautiful thing that Louie had ever seen.

Across the bay, masses of civilians stood in the streets, looking at the sky. As the plane passed into the civilians' view, Frank Tinker heard the people shouting, sounds that blended into a roar. Louie glanced toward the south end of camp. The Bird was standing just outside his office, motionless and expressionless, watching the plane.

"It was not their Messiah," Martindale wrote, "but ours." ——

The bomber was flying at perfect liberty. Steakley guided it in a series of straight runs over the city as his crewmen snapped photographs. Below, the guards began pursuing the elated POWs, trying to force them back into the barracks. The men shushed each other, fearing that they'd be beaten for celebrating. The clamor died down. Louie stood with the other men and watched the bomber, occasionally darting between barracks to avoid the guards.

Steakley flew over Tokyo for more than an hour. No Japanese planes or guns engaged him. Finally, as he turned back for Saipan, a Zero banked up for his tail, followed briefly, then turned away.

Newspapers were relatively easy to come by in Omori. Slave laborers snuck them in, and each day, at his work site, Milton McMullen gave a Korean truck driver a bag of stolen rice in exchange for a small English-language paper, which McMullen smuggled into camp in his boot. For the POWs, the papers were inexhaustibly amusing. Though the Japanese press covered the European theater accurately, it was notorious for distorting the news of the Pacific war, sometimes absurdly. Louie once read a story about a Japanese pilot who ran out of ammunition in a dogfight and downed his opponent with a rice ball.

On the day after the B-29 flyover, the coverage wore a similar stripe. "Paper says, 'Lone enemy B29 visits Tokyo area,'" wrote POW Ernest Norquist in his diary. "It said it came from the Mariana Island group, flew over the city and 'was drive off' [sic] without dropping a single bomb. I laughed as I read the words 'driven off' for neither the anti-aircraft fire nor the Zeros had come within miles of that great big beautiful bird." Louie saw another headline that said the bomber had FLED IN CONSTERNATION.

The plane had simply crossed over Tokyo, but everyone in Japan, captive and free, knew what it meant. Every morning, the Omori POWs were assembled and ordered to call out their number in Japanese. After November 1, 1944, the man assigned number twenty-nine would sing out "Niju ku!" at the top of his lungs. "Not even bayonet prods," wrote Wade, "could wipe the smiles from the POW faces now."

Louie wasn't smiling for long. The B-29, and what it portended, fed the Bird's vitriol. One day Louie was in his barracks, sitting with friends far in the rear, out of sight of the door, in case the Bird came in. As the men passed around a cigarette rolled in toilet paper, two guards banged in, screaming "Keirei!" Louie leapt up in tandem with the other men. In bounded the Bird.

For several seconds, the Bird looked around. He took a few steps into the room, and Louie came into his view. The corporal rushed down the barracks and halted before Louie. He wore the webbed belt that Louie had seen on him his first day in Omori. The buckle was several

inches square, made of heavy brass. Standing before Louie, the Bird jerked the belt off his waist and grasped one end with both hands.

“You come to attention last!”

The Bird swung the belt backward, with the buckle on the loose end, and then whipped it around himself and forward, as if he were performing a hammer throw. The buckle rammed into Louie’s left temple and ear.

Louie felt as if he had been shot in the head. Though he had resolved never to let the Bird knock him down, the power of the blow, and the explosive pain that followed, overawed everything in him. His legs seemed to liquefy, and he went down. The room spun.

Louie lay on the floor, dazed, his head throbbing, blood running from his temple. When he gathered his wits, the Bird was crouching over him, making a sympathetic, almost maternal sound, a sort of Awww. He pulled a fold of toilet paper from his pocket and pressed it gently into Louie’s hand. Louie held the paper to his temple.

“Oh, it stop, eh?” the Bird said, his voice soft.

Louie pulled himself upright. The Bird waited for him to steady himself. The soothing voice and the offer of the paper for his wound were revelations to Louie: There was compassion in this man. The sense of relief was just entering his mind when the buckle, whirling around from the Bird’s swinging arms, struck his head again, exactly where it had hit before. Louie felt pain bursting through his skull, his body going liquid again. He smacked into the floor. ——

For several weeks, Louie was deaf in his left ear. The Bird continued to beat him, every day. As his attacker struck him, Louie bore it with clenched fists and eyes blazing, but the assaults were wearing him down. The sergeant began lording over his dream life, coming at him and pounding him, his features alight in vicious rapture. Louie spent hour after hour in prayer, begging for God to save him. He lost himself in fantasies of running through an Olympic stadium, climbing onto a podium. And he thought of home, tormented by thoughts of what his disappearance must have done to his mother. He longed to write to her, but there was no point. Once, a Japanese officer had announced that men could write home, and everyone in camp penned letters to their parents, wives, children, and steady girls. When the Bird learned of it, he called in Commander Maher, handed him the letters, and forced him to burn them.

One day in mid-November, Louie was sitting in his barracks when the Bird walked in and approached him, accompanied by two Japanese strangers. Louie expected a beating, but instead, the strangers were friendly. They told Louie that they were producers from Radio Tokyo and that they had something they thought he’d like to see. They handed Louie a piece of paper. Louie looked at it: It was a transcript of an NBC radio broadcast announcing his death. The transcript was real. Louie’s death declaration, delivered in June, had reached the American media on November 12, that same week.

The Radio Tokyo men wanted Louie to come to their studio to announce that he was alive on the Postman Calls show. They wanted Louie to do this, they said, for his sake and that of his suffering family. He was free to write his own message. Louie didn’t trust them, and gave them no answer. They told him to take a day to think about it. Louie consulted Martindale, who told him that several POWs had made such broadcasts, and as long as Louie didn’t read propaganda, there was no harm in accepting.

So Louie said yes. The Radio Tokyo men brought him pen and paper, and he set to work. Knowing that his family might not believe that it was really he, he added details that he hoped would convince them. To ensure that his message got through, he decided to speak positively about his captors. He included the names of other POWs who feared that their families thought they were dead, and also mentioned Bill Harris, whom he'd last seen a month and a half earlier, at Ofuna. He opted not to mention Phil. He hadn't seen the pilot for eight months, and didn't know if he was still alive.

Louie was driven to the Radio Tokyo studio. The producers greeted him as if he were a beloved friend. They read his speech and gave it a hearty approval. It would be taped for broadcast two days later. The producers planned to use that evening's broadcast to tease the audience, then wait before presenting his voice to the world, proof that they were telling the truth.

Louie was taken to the microphone and given his cue. He read his message, to the pleasure of the producers. As the officials prepared to drive him back to Omori, Louie went to a producer who had been especially kind. He said that there was a man in camp named Watanabe who was beating the POWs. The producer seemed concerned and told Louie that he'd see what he could do. —

In San Francisco at half past two on the morning of November 18, 1944, a young woman named Lynn Moody was alone in the Office of War Information, working the graveyard shift. Across the hall in the Federal Communications Commission station, one of her colleagues was listening to Japanese radio and typing up broadcasts for review by propaganda analysts. Moody was bored, so she crossed the hall to say hello. The colleague asked if Moody could fill in while she took a break.

Moody slipped on the earphones and began typing. The show airing was Postman Calls. As she typed, Moody was startled to hear a name that she knew well: Louis Zamperini. Moody was a member of the USC class of 1940, and Louie was an old friend. The announcer was speaking about the October 18 message that had been broadcast, supposedly from Louie, but in fact written without Louie's knowledge. Giddy with excitement, Moody typed, placing unclear words within parentheses:

Exactly one month ago we broadcast a message. This message over the same station, same program, "Postman Calls," was from First Lieutenant Louis (Silvie) Zamperini, United States Army Air Corps. Recently a news report has been brought to our attention in which it is stated that First Lieutenant Louis Zamperini is listed as dead by the United States War Department. According to the report, Lieutenant Zamperini was reported missing in action in the South Pacific in May, 1943. The apparently uninformed source of this item is a broadcasting station in California quoting the War Department of the United States of America. We hope we can rectify this mistake on someone's part by saying that Louis Zamperini is alive and well as a prisoner of war here in Tokyo.

This is one of the many examples of the men missing in action erroneously reported and later being established as a lie. The last war was full of such instances and much suffering and heartaches could have been avoided by the transmittal of reliable information to the parties concerned regarding the whereabouts of men (in such cases);

It is one of the purposes of this program to alleviate this condition and furnish speedy, reliable and authentic message service to the relatives and friends of men interned in prisoner of war camps throughout Japan. We sincerely hope Louis' mother is listening in tonight or will be informed of what we say.

Long will Louis Zamperini's name live in our memories. Those of us from the regions of Southern California well recall the days that Louis was breaking all records in the mile run. His unbroken national interscholastic mile record stands as a challenge to the aspirants of the (Ginger Cup). We followed closely Zamperini's efforts in 1936 Olympic games held in Berlin, Germany. His opponents and some of the foremost in the country speak highly of him. He has run against such names as (Bensig) and Cunningham. The same personality that so endeared him to us as he raced against time on the tracks of the world is not dead but very much alive and with us yet. We regret the unhappiness that must have accompanied the news of his reported death but hope that the efforts of his fellow prisoners of war on "Postman Calls" will (atone) in some small way for the error.

So chin up, Mrs. Louis Zamperini of (Torrance) California, Louis is here; the same old Louis, cheerful, sportsmanlike, the idol of all our Southern California fans and graduates. You might pass the glad tidings along, Mrs. Zamperini, for we know all the lovers of the (spiked shoe) sport will b [sic] glad to hear this. Louis is not on the track anymore an [sic] for that we are sorry. He will be missed there. Louis is neither missing nor dead as has been reported and for that we are more than glad. It makes us very happy indeed to have performed this service for our prisoners and relatives and it is out [sic] earnest wish that no other such instances of this information will be forthcoming. We hope this little group of prisoners connected with "Postman Calls" program can be of further service in the future. That's what we're here for, so keep on listening, Mrs. Zamperini, and don't mention it; the pleasure is all ours.

Moody typed as fast as she could, making a string of typos in her exhilaration. About an hour later, the FCC woman came back. "I practically danced around the room telling her about it," Moody later wrote.

Down the coast in Torrance, the Zamperinis were coping with the aftermath of the public announcement of Louie's death. After a package came bearing Louie's Purple Heart, a letter arrived concerning his life insurance payout, \$10,000. Louise deposited the money in the bank but didn't spend any of it. When Louie came home, she declared, it would be his. And after the news of Louie's death broke, the film director Cecil B. DeMille showed up to do a radio interview with the family for the Sixth War Bond Drive. Sylvia and Louise were given scripts that called for them to speak of Louie as if he were dead. Out of politeness, the Zamperinis read the scripts as written.

Somewhere in all of this, a deliveryman came, bearing a bouquet of flowers for Sylvia. It was an anniversary gift from her husband, Harvey, now manning a tank gun in Holland. A few days later she got a telegram: Harvey had been wounded. The telegram said nothing of what his injuries were, or how serious. Sylvia waited, knotted with anxiety. Finally, a letter arrived, composed by Harvey and

dictated to a nurse from his hospital bed. His tank had been hit and had burst into flames. He had escaped, but his hands and face were burned. Of all the terrible scenarios that had run through Sylvia's mind, fire was the one thing that she'd never imagined. Harvey was, after all, a firefighter. Exhausted and barely able to eat, Sylvia crept through November, haunted by nightmares and growing ever more gaunt. —

On November 20, Lynn Moody, still in high spirits over the broadcast about Louie two days before, was back working the midnight-to-eight shift. At two-thirty A.M., one of the FCC transcribers yelled to her to come quickly.

Moody ran in, put on the earphones, and listened. It was Postman Calls again. "Hello, America," the announcer began, "this is the postman calling and bringing a special message as promised earlier in tonight's program to Mrs. Louis Zamperini, 2028 Gramercy Street, Torrance, California. We hope Mrs. Zamperini is listening in tonight for we have a real treat for her. Her son has come down to the studio especially to send her this message of reassurance after the erroneous report of a few days ago by the United States War Department, that he was officially given up as dead and missing. We assure Mrs. Zamperini that such is not the case. The next voice heard will be that of First Lieutenant Louis Helzie [sic] Zamperini, United States Air Force, now interned in the Tokyo camp. Go right ahead, Lieutenant Zamperini."

A young man's voice came across the airwaves. Moody knew the instant she heard it: It was Louie. —

Hello mother and father, relatives and friends. This is your Louie talking. Through the courtesy of the authorities here I am broadcasting this personal message to you. This will be the first time in two and one half years that you will have heard my voice. I am sure it sounds the same to you as it did when I left home. I am uninjured and in good health and can hardly wait until the day we are together again. Not having heard from you since my most abrupt departure, I have been somewhat worried about the condition of the family, as far as health is concerned. I hope this message finds all of you in the best of health and good spirits. I am now interned in the Tokyo prisoners' camp and am being treated as well as can be expected under war time conditions. The camp authorities are kind to me and I have no kick coming. Please write as often as you can and in doing so, send me snapshots of everyone. In my lonesome hours nothing would be more appreciated than to look at pictures of the family. Before I forget it, Dad, I would be very pleased if you would keep my guns in good condition so we might do some good hunting when I return home. Mother Sylvia and Virginia, I hope you will keep up your wonderful talents in the kitchen. I often visualize those wonderful pies and cakes you make. Is Pete still able to pay you his weekly visits from San Diego? I hope he is still near home. Give my best to Gorton, Harvey, Eldon and Henry and wish them the best of care. I send my fondest love to Sylvia, Virginia and Pete and hope they are enjoying their work at the present. I miss them very much. Since I have been in Japan I have run into several of my old acquaintances. You will probably remember a few of them. The tall Marine, William Harris, from Kentucky is here and enjoying good health. Lorren Stoddard Stanley Maneivve and Peter Hryskanich are the same. You must remember William Hasty from Bishopville? We have been rooming together for the past two months. He is looking fine. I know that you have taken care of my personal belongings and saving long

ago. You have no doubt received the rest of my belongings from the Army. Hello to Bob Lewellyn and all of my home town friends. Before closing I wish you a merry Xmas and a Happy New Year.

Your loving son, Louie

Later that day, the phone rang at the Zamperinis' house. The caller was a woman from the nearby suburb of San Marino. She said that she'd been listening to her radio when the station had aired an intercepted broadcast of an American prisoner of war speaking on Japanese radio. The broadcast had been scratchy and indistinct, but she was sure that she had heard the name right. The POW she had heard, she said, was Louie.

The Zamperinis were shocked and wary. The woman was a stranger, and they were afraid that she was a prankster. Sylvia and Louise asked for her address and drove to her house. The woman told them everything she had heard. Sylvia and Louise thanked her and left. They believed the woman, but they didn't know if they could believe the broadcast itself. It could easily have been faked. "I was thinking, 'Could it be true? Could it be true?'" Sylvia recalled.

After Sylvia and Louise got home, a Western Union telegram arrived from the provost marshal general. It read, FOLLOWING ENEMY PROPAGANDA BROADCAST FROM JAPAN HAS BEEN INTERCEPTED . Below were Louie's words, as typed by Moody. The telegram ended with a disclaimer: PENDING FURTHER CONFIRMATION THIS REPORT DOES NOT ESTABLISH HIS STATUS AS A PRISONER OF WAR.

Messages began pouring in, from friends and strangers all over the country, telling the Zamperinis of the broadcast, which had been intercepted and re-aired on several stations. And Louie's uncle Gildo Dossi called from Wilmington, Iowa. He had clicked on his radio and heard a voice that he felt certain was that of his nephew.

The messages relaying the content of the broadcast were varied, but a common thread ran through several of them: a request that they take care of Louie's guns. Louie had grown up hunting, shooting rabbits in the fields around Torrance and on the Cahuilla Indian Reservation, and he was especially careful with his guns. To the Zamperinis, this was the fingerprint, the detail that the Japanese could not have known. Louise and Sylvia dissolved in tears, then began shouting with joy.

Pete picked up the phone, dialed Payton Jordan's number, and shouted three words into the receiver: "Payt! He's alive!"

Twenty-six "Madness"

THE RADIO TOKYO MEN WERE BACK AT OMORI, SMILING. What a lovely voice Louie had, what a brilliant job he had done. How about another broadcast?

As long as he wrote his own copy, Louie saw no reason to decline. He composed another message to his family, then rode with the producers to Tokyo. When he reached the

studio, the producers announced a change of plans. They didn't need the message he'd written; they had one all ready. They handed Louie a sheet of paper. This is what it said, exactly as written:

Well, believe it or not ... I guess I'm one of those "Lucky guys", or maybe, I dunno, maybe I'm really unlucky ... Anyway ... here's me, Louis Zamperini, age 27, hometown Los Angeles, California, good ole United States of America speaking. What I mean by lucky is that I'm still alive and healthy ... Yes, and it's a funny thing ... I've heard and also saw with my own eyes that I'm washed-up that is I was reported to have died in combat.... Yes, one of those who died gallantry [sic] fighting for the cause ... I think the official report went something like this ... 'First Lieutenant Louis S. Zamperini, holder of the national interscholastic mile record, is, listed as dead by the War Department ... The former University of Southern California miler was reported missing in action in the South Pacific in May 1943' ... Well, what do you know?... Boy.... that's rich.... Here I am just as alive as I could be.... but hell I'm supposed to be dead.... Yeah and this reminds me of another fellow who's in the same boat as me or at least he was.... Anyway he told me that he was officially reported as 'killed in action' but in reality was a prisoner-of-war.... After several months he received a letter from his wife in which she told him that she had married again since she thought he was dead ... Of course, she was astonished to hear that he was safe and held in an internment camp.... She however, consoled him by saying that she was willing to divorce again or marry him once again when he gets home.... Boy, I really feel sorry for a fellow like that and the blame lies with the official who allow such unreliable reports [sic].... After all the least they can do is to let the folks back home know just where their boy are [sic]... Anyway that's not my worry but I hope the folks back home are properly notified of the fact that I am alive and intend to stay alive ... It's certainly a sad world when a fellow can't even be allowed to live, I mean when a fellow is killed off by a so-called 'official report.... How about that?...

Louie was aghast. He had long wondered why he'd been spared from execution on Kwajalein, after the nine marines had been killed, and why he'd been subjected to the will-weakening torment of Ofuna yet not interrogated, even though everyone else had been. At last, the Japanese had made their intentions clear. On Kwajalein, after Louie's execution had been ordered, an officer had persuaded his superiors to keep Louie alive to make him into a propaganda tool. A famous American Olympian, he'd reasoned, would be especially valuable.* The Japanese had probably sent Louie to the crucible of Ofuna, then to Omori under the Bird, to make his life in camp unbearable so he'd be willing to do anything, even betray his country, to escape it. They had hidden him from the world, keeping his name off Red Cross rosters, and waited until his government had publicly declared his death before announcing that he was alive. In doing so, they hoped to embarrass America and undermine American soldiers' faith in their government.

Louie refused to read the statement. Still smiling, the producers asked him to join them on a little tour. They brought him to a cafeteria and served him a delicious American-style meal, then took him to a private living area that had beds with mattresses and sheets. If Louie would make the broadcast, the producers said, he could live here, and he'd never have to see Omori

again. Finally, Louie was introduced to a group of men, Australians and Americans. These men, the producers said, were helping them make broadcasts. As Louie held out his hand, the propaganda prisoners dropped their eyes to the floor. Their faces said it all; if Louie agreed to make this broadcast, he would be forced into a life as his enemy's propagandist.

Louie was taken back to the studio and urged to do the broadcast. He refused. The smiles evaporated; the faces hardened. The producers ordered him to do it. He said no. The producers left the room to meet in private.

Louie was alone in the studio. In front of him were several copies of the message that they wanted him to deliver. He slid his hand through a tear in his pocket, snagged a copy, and pulled it into his coat. The producers returned.

"Okay," one of them said. "I think you go to punishment camp." Omori was called a punishment camp, but the producers were clearly referring to some other place. For Louie, any camp had to be better than Omori, because the Bird wouldn't be there. The producers gave him one last chance to change his mind. He did not.

Louie was dumped back at Omori. The Bird was waiting for him, glowing with renewed hatred. His beatings resumed, with intensified vigor. Maybe Louie was being punished for refusing to make the broadcast, or maybe the producer to whom Louie had appealed for help had told the Bird of Louie's accusations. Louie stood his ground, took his beatings with rebellion boiling in him, and waited to be shipped to "punishment camp." And like all the other POWs, he watched the sky, praying that the promise of that first B-29 would be fulfilled. —

In the early afternoon on Friday, November 24, the Tokyo sirens began to howl. From the sky came an immense shivering sound. The POWs looked up. There, so high that they appeared to be gleaming slits in the sky, were acres and acres of B-29s, one hundred and eleven of them, flying toward an aircraft factory on the rim of the city. Caught in what would later be called the jet stream, the planes were streaking along at speeds approaching 445 miles per hour, almost 100 miles per hour faster than they were built to fly. The Americans had arrived.

"It was a cold, clear, sunny day," wrote POW Johan Arthur Johansen, who was at a slave site at the time. "The planes were shining like silver in the sunshine against the blue sky overhead ... It was a beautiful sight which lift[ed] our spirit right up to the sky." Men began yelling, "Drop the bombs!" and "Happy landings!" and "Welcome back!" The guards stared up, so awed by the planes that they didn't seem to hear the men shouting.

At Omori, the camp accountant, Yuichi Hatto, was standing with a group of POWs. As they watched, a lone Japanese fighter raced toward the planes, then abruptly, startlingly, flew straight into a bomber, the smaller plane shattering and raining down on Tokyo Bay. The bomber began falling, white smoke twirling from it. A single parachute puffed from its side, and one of the POWs cried, "One safe! Safe!" The English word caught in Hatto's ear; he had heard it used only in baseball games. The bomber hit the water, killing all aboard. The lone survivor, under his parachute, wafted over Tokyo as gently as a dandelion seed. As the man sank into the city, Hatto had a sick feeling, thinking of what would happen to that airman when he reached the ground. The other bombers flew on. A few minutes later, there was distant booming. —

As the fall stretched on, B-29s crossed over Omori nearly every day, sometimes a lone plane, sometimes vast continents of aircraft. On sunny days, the men stood out and watched them; on cloudy days, they only heard them, a growl above the gray. In Tokyo, the sirens sang so incessantly that the POWs began sleeping through them.

Eighty-one bombers went over on November 27. On the drizzly night of November 29–30, the prisoners were awakened by two incendiary raids on Tokyo's industrial areas. Explosions were heard far away, and the POWs could see licks of fire on the mainland, the last gasps of the 2,773 structures that burned that night. Civilians began streaming over the bridge and camping outside Omori's walls in hopes of escaping the bombs.

One day that fall, Louie stood outside, watching Japanese fighters turning lupine circles around a crowd of B-29s. The battle was so high that only the giant, shining bombers were consistently visible; the fighters, tiny in contrast, flickered in and out of view as the sunlight caught them. Every little while, there was a sharp, brief burst of light alongside the bombers. To Louie, it looked like firecrackers. It was the fighters, gunned by the B-29s, blowing up. The bombers flew on, imperious. The Bird watched the scene with a stricken face. "Hikoki dame," he said. "Hikoki dame." Japan's planes, he was lamenting, were no good.

Every B-29 that beat a path over Tokyo wound the Bird tighter. He hounded the POWs with endless inspections, prohibited smoking, singing, and card playing, and outlawed religious services. He slapped one officer across the face repeatedly for five minutes, made him stand at attention, coatless, for four hours in the cold, then ordered him to clean the benjos for two hours a day for two weeks. He beat a kitchen worker with a spoon the size of an oar. He pawed through the men's belongings, confiscating personal papers and photographs of loved ones, deeming much of it "suspicious" and destroying it. He was seized with paranoia. "You win war, and you make all Japanese like black slaves!" he shouted at a POW. He hauled Martindale to his office, accused him of plotting to burn down a barracks, and beat him so energetically, with fists and a kendo stick, that he overturned all of the furniture.

In December, the Bird left camp for several days, and Omori was briefly peaceful. But on the night before the Bird was slated to return, the POWs were jarred from their sleep to hear him charging through camp in a driving rainstorm, yelling that it was a fire drill. When the designated firefighters assembled under the freezing downpour, the Bird punched several of them in the face, ran through barracks shouting and punching other men, then ordered every man in camp to line up outside. When Louie and the others did as told, the Bird drew his sword, swung it around, and screamed orders and invectives. For two hours, the Bird forced the men to pump water on imaginary fires, beat out phantom blazes with brooms, and run in and out of buildings "rescuing" food and documents.

As December progressed, the Bird's mania deepened. He rounded up the officers and hounded them across the bridge and into Tokyo, on the pretense of retrieving firewood from bombed-out houses. Troughs of water for firefighting had been set along the streets, and as the men marched, the Bird leapt upon one, drew his sword, and screamed "Keirei!" The men saluted him, and the Bird, lost in a fantasy, stood on his roost in an absurdly exaggerated troop-reviewing pose that reminded Tom Wade of Mussolini. Civilians gathered and began cheering. After the POWs had passed, the Bird jumped down, ran ahead, and hopped onto another

trough, shouting, striking his pose, and demanding salutes. Over and over he repeated the farce, driving the men on for miles.

When the bombs were falling, the Bird would snap, running through camp with his sword in the air, wailing at the men, foam flying from his mouth, lips peeled back in a wicked rictus, eyelid drooping, face purple. During at least two bombings, he prevented the POWs from seeking cover in the trenches. In one incident, he ran the POWs outside, stood them at attention, and ordered the guards to aim their rifles at them. With bombs booming, the Bird raced up and down the line of terrified POWs, swinging his sword over their heads.

Every escalation in the bombing brought a parallel escalation in the Bird's attacks on Louie. He sped around camp in search of the American, fuming and furious. Louie hid, but the Bird always found him. Three or four times a week, the Bird launched himself at Louie in what Frank Tinker would call his "death lunge," coming at him with fists flying, going for his face and head. Louie would emerge dazed and bleeding. He was more and more convinced that Watanabe wouldn't stop until he was dead.

Louie began to come apart. At night, the Bird stalked his dreams, screeching, seething, his belt buckle flying at Louie's skull. In the dreams, the smothered rage in Louie would overwhelm him, and he'd find himself on top of his monster, his hands on the corporal's neck, strangling the life from him. —

As Louie suffered through December, some three hundred miles away, his former pilot was wasting away in a filthy, unheated barracks in the Zentsuji POW camp. Phil had been transferred to Zentsuji the previous August, joining one-legged Fred Garrett, who'd been transferred from Ofuna.

Though Ofuna interrogators had spoken of Zentsuji as a "plush" reward, the camp was no such place. The prisoners' diet was so poor that the men wandered the compound, ravenous, pulling up weeds and eating them. Their only drinking water came from a reservoir fed by runoff from rice paddies fertilized with human excrement, and to avoid dying of thirst, the POWs had to drink it, leaving 90 percent of them afflicted with dysentery. In one barracks room, men lost an average of fifty-four pounds over eighteen months. An officer estimated that twenty men fainted each day. Almost everyone had beriberi, and some men went blind from malnutrition. On the last day of November, they buried an American who had starved to death.

There was one blessing at Zentsuji. Phil was permitted to send brief messages home on postcards. He wrote one after another. They were mailed, but got snarled in the postal system. The fall waned and another Christmas approached, and Phil's family received none of them.

A year and a half had passed since Phil had disappeared. His family remained in limbo, having heard nothing about him since his plane had gone down. In November, they had learned about Louie's broadcast. The news had been tantalizing, but frustrating. Louie had mentioned other servicemen who were with him, but the names had been obscured by static, and the transcript hadn't conveyed them with certainty. Had Louie mentioned Allen?

On a Friday night in December 1944, the telephone rang in Kelsey Phillips's home. On the line was a major from the adjutant general's office at the War Department. Probably through the Red Cross, the department had received news from Zentsuji. Allen was alive.

Kelsey was jubilant. She asked the major to cable her husband and her son's fiancée, and in Washington, Cecy got the news she had awaited for so long. The fortune-teller had said

that Allen would be found before Christmas. It was December 8. Overcome with elation, Cecy called her brother to shout the news, quit her job, dashed through her apartment throwing clothes and pictures of Allen into a suitcase, and hopped a plane back to Indiana to wait for her fiancé to come home.

Four days before Christmas, a card from Allen, written in October, finally reached home. "Dear Folk: Hope you all are well and am looking forward to being home with you. I hope we can go rabbit hunting before the season closes Dad. Give my love to Cecy Martha and Dick. Happy birthday dad." Kelsey pored over the precious slip of paper, comforted by the familiar lines of her son's handwriting. Chaplain Phillips, now stationed in France, got the news on Christmas Eve. "Words really cannot describe the way I feel," he wrote to his daughter. "I am in an altogether new world now. I can think of nothing more wonderful. It is a real touch of all that heaven means."

In a letter officially confirming that Allen was a POW, the Phillipses were asked not to speak publicly about the fact that Allen had been discovered alive. Kelsey would henceforth heed this request, but the letter had reached her too late; by the morning after the War Department's call, the news was already all over town, and stories about Allen's survival were in the local papers. The Zamperinis, who had received a similar letter stating that the War Department now believed that Louie's broadcast had been real, were also asked not to speak of it publicly. The War Department probably didn't want it known that they had erroneously declared two airmen dead, especially as the Japanese were exploiting this fact.

Kelsey was allowed to send one cable to her son, and she filled the other days writing letters to him. On December 14, she wrote to Louise Zamperini. As relieved as Kelsey was for Allen, there was heaviness in her heart. Of all of the men on Green Hornet, only Louie and Allen had been found. Hugh Cuppernell's mother was so demoralized that she could no longer bear to write to the other mothers. Sadie Glassman, mother of the belly gunner, Frank Glassman, had written to Louise, asking if she had heard anything about Frank. "Even though we have heard nothing," she wrote, "the fact that you might know something makes us feel as though there might be a little hope." "It is difficult to rejoice outwardly (though I do in my heart) when I think of the other mothers whom I have learned to love, and realize how keenly they feel the loss that is theirs," Kelsey wrote to Louise. "How my heart goes out to them and I shall write them every one." —

As Christmas neared, Louie faltered. Starvation was consuming him. The occasional gifts from the thieves helped, but not enough. What was most maddening was that ample food was so near. Twice that fall, Red Cross relief packages had been delivered for the POWs, but instead of distributing them, camp officials had hauled them into storage and begun taking what they wanted from them.* They made no effort to hide the stealing. "We could see them throwing away unmistakable wrappers, carrying bowls of bulk cocoa and sugar between huts and even trying to wash clothes with cakes of American cheese," wrote Tom Wade. The Bird was the worst offender, smoking Lucky Strike cigarettes and openly keeping Red Cross food in his room. From one delivery of 240 Red Cross boxes, the Bird stole forty-eight, more than five hundred pounds of goods.

Toward the end of December, the Bird ordered all of the men to the compound, where they found a truck brimming with apples and oranges. In all of his time as a POW, Louie had seen only one piece of fruit, the tangerine that Sasaki had given him. The men were told that

they could take two pieces each. As the famished men swarmed onto the pile, Japanese photographers circled, snapping photos. Then, just as the men were ready to devour the fruit, the order came to put it all back. The entire thing had been staged for propaganda.

On Christmas Eve, some Red Cross packages were finally handed out. Louie wrote triumphantly of it in his diary. His box, weighing some eleven pounds, contained corned beef, cheese, pâté, salmon, butter, jam, chocolate, milk, prunes, and four packs of Chesterfields. All evening long, the men of Omori traded goods, smoked, and gorged themselves.

That night, there was another treat, and it came about as the result of a series of curious events. Among the POWs was a chronically unwashed, ingenious, and possibly insane kleptomaniac named Mansfield. Shortly before Christmas, Mansfield broke into the storehouse—slipping past seven guards—and made off with several Red Cross packages, which he buried under his barracks. Discovering his cache, guards locked him in a cell. Mansfield broke out, stole sixteen more parcels, and snuck them back into his cell. He hid the contents of the packages in a secret compartment he'd fashioned himself, marking the door with a message for other POWs: Food, help yourself, lift here. Caught again, he was tied to a tree in the snow without food or water, wearing only pajamas, and beaten. By one account, he was left there for ten days. Late one night, when Louie was walking back from the benjo, he saw the camp interpreter, Yukichi Kano, kneeling beside Mansfield, draping a blanket over him. The next morning, the blanket was gone, retrieved before the Bird could see it. Eventually, Mansfield was untied and taken to a civilian prison, where he flourished.

The one good consequence of this event was that in the storehouse, Mansfield had discovered a Red Cross theatrical trunk. He told other POWs about it, and this gave the men the idea of boosting morale by staging a Christmas play. They secured the Bird's approval by stroking his ego, naming him "master of ceremonies" and giving him a throne at the front of the "theater"—the bathhouse—outfitted with planks perched on washtubs to serve as a stage. The men decided to put on a musical production of Cinderella, written, with creative liberties, by a British POW. Frank Tinker put his operatic gifts to work as Prince Leander of Pantoland. The Fairy Godmother was played by a mountainous cockney Brit dressed in a tutu and tights. Characters included Lady Dia Riere and Lady Gonna Riere. Louie thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. Private Kano translated for the guards, who sat in the back, laughing and clapping. The Bird gloried in the limelight, and for that night, he let Louie and the others be.

At Zentsuji, Christmas came to Phil and Fred Garrett. Some POWs scrounged up musical instruments and assembled in the camp. Before seven hundred starving men, they played rousing music as the men sang along. They ended with the national anthems of England, Holland, and the United States. The Zentsuji POWs stood together at attention in silence, thinking of home. —

After Christmas, the Bird abruptly stopped attacking the POWs, even Louie. He paced about camp, brooding. The men watched him and wondered what was going on.

Several times that year, a dignitary named Prince Yoshitomo Tokugawa had come to camp. A prominent and influential man, reportedly a descendant of the first shogun, Tokugawa was touring camps for the Japanese Red Cross. At Omori, he met with POW Lewis Bush, who told him about the Bird's cruelty.

The Bird was suspicious. After Tokugawa first visited, the Bird forbade Bush from speaking to him again. When the prince returned, Bush defied the Bird, who beat him savagely as soon as the prince left. Tokugawa kept coming, and Bush kept meeting with him. The Bird slugged and kicked Bush, but Bush refused to be cowed. Deeply troubled by what he heard, Tokugawa went to the war office and the Red Cross and pushed to have something done about Watanabe. He told Bush that he was encountering resistance. Then, just before the New Year, the prince at last succeeded. The Bird was ordered to leave Omori.

Tokugawa's victory was a hollow one. Officials made no effort to take the Bird out of contact with POWs. They simply ordered his transfer to a distant, isolated camp, where he'd have exactly the same sway over prisoners, without the prying eyes of the prince and the Red Cross. Ensuring that no censure of Watanabe was implied, Colonel Sakaba promoted him to sergeant.

The Bird threw himself a good-bye party and ordered some of the POW officers to come. The officers dashed around camp to gather stool samples from the greenest dysentery patients, mixed up a ferocious gravy, and slathered it over a stack of rice cakes. When they arrived at the party, they presented the cakes to the Bird as a token of their affection. While the men lavished the Bird with lamentations on how they'd miss him, the Bird ate heartily. He seemed heartbroken to be leaving.

Later that day, Louie looked out of the barracks and saw the Bird standing by the gate in a group of people, shaking hands. All of the POWs were in a state of high animation. Louie asked what was happening, and someone told him that the Bird was leaving for good. Louie felt almost out of his head with joy.

If the rice cakes performed as engineered, they didn't do so quickly. The Bird crossed the bridge onto the mainland, looking perfectly well. At Omori, the reign of terror was over.