Chapter 7. March, 1953, or December: *Pearl and Art, A Love Story*

Word Count: 4,500

I’ll tell you, man, Benevente was an interesting guy, and after he took over u.p.h., the underprivvie homeroom, I never really tried to get out. Plus I’d always get an A-U-U in art, so I was stuck anyhow. Plus, if you got out of u.p.h. mainly what it meant was that they’d let you go every other Friday or so to watch “Back to Baton” for the thirtieth time, and who wants to see that sleeper again or have regular P.E. when they’d let us hang around on the outskirts of girls’ PE? Big punishment. And I’d rather talk to Benevente, or anybody, than listen again to that John Wayne crock in the Baton picture. And the worst thing was that every time the bad guys were about to nail John Wayne, the film would break.

Donny’d always start with the questions, and Franklin—that’s my name*—would try to answer them. How can you get an A in art when—what is it?—your work habits and cooperation are unsatisfactory? (Actually, why would a good artist have to cooperate? I mean, if you’re making a sculpture, you’re not playing for the L.A. Dons. Another case where Franklin thinks this is what life is all about, although the Boy’s Vice never knew what he meant. And the whole idea of an artist is to *break* your damn habits. The Boy’s Vice is never going to get this.)

I have the hots for the teacher? Connie Rodríguez? (It could of been Polly.) I love that porous, damp skin she has on her cheeks and her high cheekbones, when she sort of mother-talks me, you know, she talks to me like I’m her kid, tells me how smart I am and what a great artist, and she has these fantastic knockers and she still thinks I’m a great artist, even though I give her lots of grief and just get myself into a lot of mess too. She’s more sanitary than Miss Sanitary what’s-her-name, except for her creamy face, just like Averytt, with all the cream coming from inside, far as I can tell. Not all slathered up.
She’d always get mad when I’d come in with a fake report card trying to make it out of u.p.h.—fake because old Benevente decided not to waste a real report card on me cause they cost a nickel or three cents or something, like mailing a letter or sending in a boxtop, and I’d tell her that I absolutely had to have an A-S-S to get out of u.p.h. and you could see her getting mad as anything but she couldn’t do anything about it (at least, not the first couple of times) because that’s exactly what I had to get, nothing less than a C-S-S. I mean, she was the one kept on giving me an A because she wouldn’t lie even though her ass was at steak, and if she didn’t like the way I was talkin to her she could of given me a C. (She knew that anything from B-S-S or below would be B-S.) She must have called up Benevente though, and told him to keep me from running fake report cards. I doubt that she said anything about A-S-S. What could she say? That’s what I had to have. If it bugs her, she can always come up with an A-E-E. But who’d believe that either—excellent on work habits and cooperation? Not me and not Michael Angela, even though he didn’t have Connie workin for him.

So Donny says, maybe she wants you to stay in u.p.h. Maybe she thinks Benevente is good for you.

Right, man, figure it out, ace. Maybe that’s why I got the hots for her, her and her fabulous cheeks and her good old big daddy Benevente. But if he’s Franklin’s dad too, then I guess that makes her Franklin’s sister. And who needs that?

I also had a C-U-S from Becker—no homework—in history. Coach Becker was a tough old guy, a red-headed guy with a butch haircut, he was a little on the chubby side for a coach, and Franklin talked to him sometimes the way he talked to Benevente or the way he would have talked to his old man. Mainly because you could actually learn something, especially when Becker would come in to run u.p.h. once in a while, and you could talk to him about some of the stuff he brought up in history. The best thing about Becker, and also guys like Benevente and a few others at Riis, was that you could make a
deal with them and they would stick to it no matter what, even if you were sort of a hood.

If they thought you actually had a chance to get your ass in gear, they’d do just about anything. And they didn’t hold any horsepuck, about how you can get crooked as a wormed out nail, and never get straightened if you had a good enough hammer comin down on you. You could count on them the way you could count on getting gas money from Downing’s piggy bank, no matter when you wanted to split. I mean, it was up to you, if you could get over the fence. But if you tried to split with a buck or two from Downing’s bank, and you didn’t put in an IOU, he’d bust you. First, he’d make you put in the IOU, plus another IOU to cover a fine, which could be as much as four bits if he had unhappy hemeroids. Then he’d figure he was hot and on a big roll, so he’d fine you for something else, like maybe you called him Frederick which Franklin probably did ever so often, and auction you off for a swat, with the winner of the auction having to put his bid money into the bank (which was always pretty full), and then the winner would try to kill you with one of Downing’s (naturally) drilled-out paddles. This was dangerous because the winner—who was usually Buck Trottmann, pride of the famous Retail Clerks International Association—would have to get his money’s worth. Franklin was always afraid the sonofabitch would go for your backbone, and not necessarily on purpose. Downing would make NancyMarie leave the room when guys got swats, and she of course never got swats no matter how much she was messing around, even with Franklin. (I would have bid the Merc just to give her tail a groovy little paddle blast. But real careful, you know?)

Anyhow, if you made a deal with any of these guys who knew how to teach, you had to keep it. Or they’d rack your ass.

One day, Buck makes a high offer and gets to swat Bernie Snope—Buck was always talking about how he wanted to stomp Bernie, mainly because Bernie was a football player, but Buck was a checkstand operator (RCIA), and maybe a little too old for this kind of stuff—and he hit
Bernie so hard and so high on his ass that the paddle went flying out of his hands and busted through the window next to Downing’s desk, with old Fred sitting right there watching the procession. Downing blinked his eyes for about half a minute, and then he gets totally pissed. Franklin couldn’t believe this scene, but Downing knew he couldn’t bust anybody for the busted window; he set up the whole system. He decided that Bernie was okay, told him to eat a Babe Ruth candy bar both for the sake of his ass and for football. Fred forgot to mention Bernie’s backbone, which probably needed more than a candy bar.

So, Becker was a lot like Downing. He had lots of rules, and you had to stick to them no matter what. Maybe his rules made more sense than Downing’s. He might let you help him set them up, the rules, but still no matter: You had to stick to them, even if you made them up. (Actually, I once heard that the drafting guys had set up Downing’s bank when he first got started, must of been World War One, when I thought they didn’t even have drafting.)

So one day, after Becker and the other coaches had killed off goofyball, Franklin and Tippy discover that the same little B-7 in the equipment room with the same goofyball was willing to let them have it. They got it, went out, started a game, got busted after about two minutes, three swats, five laps. This was Becker’s way of bringing them down, especially since they would have to run laps through girls’ PE. But three swats would be like putting you up for crucifiction, the way they’re going to do with this Carol Chessman, whatever she did, to her boyfriend or whatever. And then maybe old Becker had set us up with this guy in the equipment room. (Maybe they had a contract.) But Franklin knew better, because he knew a few things about Becker. He knew that a guy like Becker would give us all the rope we needed to hang ourselves—in other words, to string ourselves up by the testacles, and then he’d hang us himself and save us the hassle and tell us that he really gave us all that rope to climb a mountain. Which, actually, he did.
Franklin knew a lot about Coach Becker because Becker also taught American history, and he showed up for class ever so often especially when Becker was talking about war, which he did a lot. So Franklin would show up two, maybe three times straight, whenever he figured Becker was going to talk about Pearl, and then get on him again if he showed at u.p.h. And all Franklin really knew about Pearl was that back when he was a kid and first heard about it, it sounded like a nice place, it had such a beautiful name that he figured it had to be a nice place to go Saturdays, you know, like Hermosa Beach was after he started going down there with Gloria Malcolm and her sister, and Gloria taught him how to ride a bike till the day he near drowned. But then he realized that, almost all the time, when people talked about it, they either got mad or started crying, or they got mad so that they could stop crying. And maybe even vice a versa, like the airraid warden did it before his heart attack. So Franklin knew something weird was going on. Especially since nobody told him what it was. Except Becker.

Becker had been right in the middle of Pearl Harbor back on December seventh, whatever year. He called it Pearl, not Pearl Harbor. He was stationed at a place called Hickman that got shot up and bombed pretty bad, and he told us he was scared shitless but was able to think about what was going on—figure it out, ace!—so that he could avoid getting killed and maybe also do some good and help out somebody. He wanted to help some of the guys who were shot up or were inside buildings that were bombed and on fire, but he couldn’t get close enough to do anything for a while, so he concentrated on getting someplace that the japanese didn’t want to blow the hell out of, so he wouldn’t get killed. He ran out into trees or something for a while.

After the planes left or at least let up a little, he said that all around Pearl everything was a total mess, and he said that you could still get killed out there because there were all sorts of fires and explosions around the scene for a long time, all over the place. He told us about guys he dug out of bombed buildings while the buildings were still flaming and falling down all over the
place and everybody was getting cooked, and what a mess these guys were, whether dead or alive. He said some of them looked like gutted rabbits on a barbecue stick, or maybe that was just the way he made it sound, to me. Becker was not a medick so he didn’t really know what to do except to try to pull some of these guys out of the fire, and half the kids listening to him were ready to puke. (The boys more than the girls. Maybe we felt more like we were there. Or could be. Maybe that other big McCuster thing, Inch On.)

He said the second war (and maybe the first too, which he didn’t teach that semester) was a lot like the civile war, that also seemed to go on forever even after everybody forgot what the hell they were supposed to be fighting about and knew it was all over anyway, and that the very first day, at Pearl, was the worst day of his life until he got to the second day and all the other days after that, and he said that all the other days which you can hardly count, were just about as bad as that first day at Pearl, so you didn’t have to know about anything other then Hickman and you knew everything that the war was all about, and even the civile war, which Becker already covered.

He said that after the zero planes backed off a little, and he and some of the guys could get out around the buildings and try to figure out what to do, that they came close to one of the buildings, that was sort of a big mess hall that worked like a cafeteria and had its own kitchen and a huge walkin fridge and had all kinds of guys working around it on the morning of the bombs, and that there were even a few guys in there eating breakfast, even though it was pretty early for a Sunday. So he goes inside this big mess hall because he hears all sorts of screaming coming out of there, from lots of guys who couldn’t run because they were dinged up, bad, or who were trapped in the fire or had already been burned bad, and Becker says that when you get burned bad and surrounded by fire what happens is that you either get sort of paralyzed or you get out of control, just like Franklin did just after they kicked him out of L.A. and he had to learn how to swim, and jumped into a pool that was almost
freezing. You get paralyzed either through ice or fire, same difference, except that when the fire reaches you you move.

So, anyway, he and a few other guys go into this place, and he said that the fire was already so bad that just about the only part of this messhall where you didn’t have flames and maybe could see what the hell was going on, was right near this little area where they had a big walk-in food storage, these fridges that people can walk into. So, it wasn’t burning as bad as all the rest of the place, but it made all sorts of crackling sounds like it was going to explode, and somebody said it would have exploded if the guys didn’t have the door of it wide open for breakfast. So Becker walks up near the door, about the only place he could go, and he sees this man, I mean, this guy’s a hawayan, just a kid that he said was a little chubby like Hilo Hattie the heavenly flower on that TV show out of Honolulu, not much older than we are, maybe already in the army or navy and just working around Hickman as a cook or whatever but he’s probly not old enough, and the guy’s on the floor, and he’s pretty broken up and can’t move and has already been burned too, but Becker can’t really see what’s going on due to smoke and because this kid has on one of these big heavy black robes that you have to wear if you go into these fridges, and don’t want to freeze your ass off, which even on December 7th whatever year, wasn’t goin to happen at Hickman, believe me.

Becker knew that he had to get out of this building, fast, he had a purple heart coming and I don’t know what all—a Purple Heart out of Pearl Harbor, the most beautiful words Franklin ever heard except for Cate Smith when she’d get goin, ‘cause they meant you were still alive if you got to wear it—and he also figured he was the only guy in the place trying to pull guys out because it was a hell of an infernal, and he figured that about the only thing that was going to happen was that he had the one chance to get this kid out, and maybe save at least somebody. He knew he could pick up the kid and carry him out even though he was a little on the chubby side, because after all Becker is a PE coach and even though he’s not the biggest guy around the place, just like Tony
Terlazzo in the 1932 olympics and has even got a little chubby himself, back at that time he must have been one strong guy like Tony who’s unbelievable when he does a lift for us, after twenty years out of the olympics, so Becker knew he could get this kid up off the floor and carry him out.

So he tries to do it, and he says he got the kid up and he couldn’t see what was going on because of the robe, and he had to hold the kid cradled in his arms instead of lifting him up to his shoulders the way a fireman does it, because the kid was all deadweight and a fireman really can’t really do this right unless the people being picked up can stand up and flop over on your shoulders, at least sort of fall on your back. So while he’s holding this sort of heavy guy like you hold a baby in your arms, the guy suddenly just sort of folds up and Becker says he almost dropped him, and then he said he felt like he was closing the saddest book he ever had to read in his life and he had to put it down, the kid just folded closed and there was nothing left in the middle of his body when the black robe sort of splits open all full of blood which had turned black because of the robe so you couldn’t see it until you touched it, and Becker sees that the kid got hit by something that was really terrible, like the day the destroyer almost cut Franklin and Donny and Averytt in half, and he said it was good that he was strong and could sort of hold the kid sideways so that the blood and his insides would not get all over everything, and that it would have been better not to move the kid at all. Except that the flame was everywhere and the smoke and the heat that kept both of them from breathing. (Except that, actually, according to Becker, the kid didn’t need to breath.)

And then he said what he had seen when the boy folded and Becker could see the life falling from his face, dying from his face, and he said that it was that image of the life disappearing from this kid’s face that was exactly the same for every other day of the war, which was just as long as the goddamn civile war and could kill you inside whether you got shot up or not, because of all those faces—and half the faces had already disappeared before you saw them anyway. But the worst of it was the way this boy looked at Becker before
he was dead, and Becker says he had never seen anything like it, like the boy loved him because, just because he was trying, and about ready to get his own ass burned off in order to save him and the kid already knew it was impossible and that all Becker really should of done was to concentrate on getting out alive, but Becker wouldn’t have done that for anything except that, as he says, sometimes your body gets in control not your brain, like when it’s paralyzed and you have no idea what its going to do next or maybe nothin but die, and then he told us more about the dying face and that all he saw was this hopeless gratitude, and then he even says that this was one way of defining love, you know?—hopeless gratitude—which made the girls cry for once in Becker’s class instead of getting sick, and that the only thing left to do in this hell out at Hickman, was to try to give a few seconds of maybe getting rescued, to somebody who is going to die no matter what you do.

Becker sort of said that maybe Froid was right about all these obsessions and how they won’t let us alone, and he said that on December 7th the main thing he wanted to do was to make sure that this hawayan kid got carried to the one building that was not on fire, and set down on clean cement with lots of other people that he and the other guys tried to rescue; but this was the place for the ones that died, and the other people just had to do their best until the ambulance or the medics showed up. He said you could freeze your ass off in Pearl on December 7th once the fire went down a little at night or later in the morning, but most of the guys were taking off their jackets and anything else they could come up with in order to cover over these dead, and that’s what Becker did. At least I bet he did.

He told us about all the government investigations that tried to throw the blame on the army, the navy, President Roosevelt or Harry S. Truman or whoever, and on everybody else except the japanese. The only one who didn’t get blamed was that Cate Smith broad, who was always too busy at high noon in New York buying war bonds, and Franklin thought she was talking about bombs. Becker actually called them japanese, which was a completely new
word to me, because all through the war all I ever heard was that the United States was fighting against the japs, along with a real hood out there somewhere called Moose O’leeney, somebody who was called the nips, some guy named Tojo, some big Hero for something named hito, the germans with their big President Hitler the shithook, and some guy named Uncle Joe Stalin. In other words, we had to kick ass on just about everybody in sight except France, like the worst Friday night you ever had in Hollywood, the night somebody peed on Berto’s Pontiac and you figured it was everybody except the french.

Even though the germans were called just plain germans, they were the toughest fighters around and were harder to beat than the japanese, who actually lasted a few years longer, or maybe just a few weeks ‘cause half the time we had to fight them on the water instead of on the ground. Becker said that words like jap were more or less a bringdown for the japanese—I mean, insulting—that thousands of japanese had lived around L.A. since I don’t know how long, and that even with all his reasons for hating japanese guys he still thought it was a good idea to call them japanese. He also said that it would be a good idea to stop calling mexicans zoot suits and rat packs and shit like that. Becker had a sort of kiss-ass attitude toward life, but it never showed up when he was swatting you, or when he was in a war. Becker was the kind of guy you’d like to have for an old man. The only thing wrong with him was that he didn’t realize that goofyball was one totally bitchen discovery, for a game. (He didn’t talk to the girl coaches who were on our side.) Another funny thing was that he also told Anton Jolst, a guy in the history class and also drafting and P.E., that his name was Tony, and that if Anton didn’t agree—swats, laps, the whole scene. So, Tony agrees. Why Becker did this, just because I guess Tony’s name was German, I leave to Froid. Or maybe Benevente. I mean, Tony Jolst still sounds a little german to me. And then, far as Tony’s are concerned, you have to ask, what about Tony Terlazzo? Ain’t he Italian?

He was actually a good guy most of the time. Becker.
So, what Franklin knew after all this was that what Becker did when he tried to save this hawaiyan kid was exactly what you do in art class, and the only grade that means a damn thing is an A-U-U because who the hell knows what your work habits were, or should of been, when you went in to try to save this kid, and who the hell was around to cooperate with? Half the people were dead. So, whenever Franklin made a good electric motor that we could blow up or got the carburetor put together on the Merc and it was like jewelry, or whenever he did something good for Downing like getting the shades and shadows of the sun perfect across some damn house or across the Coliseum out there in Rome, not the new one in L.A., that he didn’t draw himself and didn’t even like. I mean, even the L. A. Dons could fill that little place in Rome. But Franklin still got the shades and shadows and did it without anything but a U-U, and he knew exactly how Becker felt, and he knew the same thing in Connie’s art class that he loved, her, and that whatever the hell Franklin did in her class (and I don’t even remember), was not all that bad a piece of artwork mainly because I did it when I saw the sun and the shades and the shadows on her and on her face, and I knew that the moisture would keep coming up from inside her and that it would last forever no matter the sun or whether she died, and that Franklin could try to get those shades and shadows and all her sunlight without knowing a damn thing about work habits, and there was nobody around to cooperate with, anymore than Hickman.

So, the deal with Becker and these other guys like Benevente and Downing was that if you got splattered to pieces, they’d come around eventually and try to round you up. For a teacher, that was a good rule. And they always respected everybody. These men, cooperating with all their rules, not like that crazy General Douglas McCuster from Baton, that place in France, who wanted all the attention, marched outta there and said “I shall return” like he was gonna go out and buy a motorcycle and come back in and take over Paris like Marlon Brando in “The Wild Won.” They’d run his ass through a
meat grinder. Just do what that general did in Germany, when they had him cut off: Just say, “nuts.” That represents everybody. Even the hawayan kid.

Far as Franklin’s concerned, that general gets an AUU. Which is the only way to set up your goddam life.

Actually, it’s a little like saying ow.