

Alex

WHO WON
HIS WAR



Chester Aaron

*As he shifted the rolled bag in his hands,
something fell to the ground...The wallet.*

Both he and Larry had already said there had been no wallet. By now Larry had dropped the money into his father's hands. Chief Burnham would be suspicious of an empty wallet. A man dressed in a suit carrying an empty wallet? No one would believe him.

Alex's eyes focused on an uncapped oil drum he'd passed and ignored a hundred times. Quickly, easily, naturally, he picked up the wallet and dropped it in. It remained on top of a thick puck of ice. He wrapped his hand in the canvas bag and struck the ice with the heel of his hand, but it didn't break. His cold fingers dug about in his pocket until he found his penknife. He chopped at the ice and struck it again with his fist. The ice broke, and the wallet dropped into the dark muck. Nobody would ever find it. But he'd lost his knife in the process, the knife Oliver had given him.

Alex looked back at the Kilroys' house. Upstairs, in what he knew to be a spare bedroom, the curtains were parted. A face hovered at the glass. It disappeared as the curtains fell back into place. But he could still see, behind the curtain, the features of the face. It wasn't Rosie or her mother. It was a man. The face moved. And disappeared.

No man had lived in that house since Rosie's father had died before Alex was born.

Also By Chester Aaron

Willa's Poppy

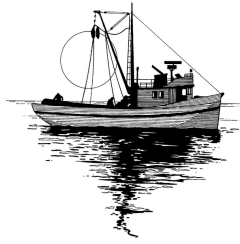
An American Ghost

Gideon



ALEX

Who Won His War



Chester Aaron



ZUMAYA THRESHOLDS

2015

AUSTIN TX

ALEX, WHO WON HIS WAR

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*This book, again, is for Benjamin,
Molly Rose, and Kelly Paloma
Segal*

Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,
Who never to himself hath said,
 This is my own, my native land!

— *Sir Walter Scott*

1

Alex Kellar
R.F.D. 2
Pequod, Conn
December 6, 1944

Sergeant Oliver Kellar
Company B, 4th Bn. 5th Regt.
101st Airborne Div.
A.P.O. 606
U.S. Army

Dear Oliver,

I won a spelling and writing contest yesterday. Best in eighth grade. I sure hate these tiny V letter forms though. You just get started and you have to stop. Lucy says they get there faster though and they save paper which helps us win this war.

Olly, I sure miss you. I took the Iris out yesterday not to fish just to sail her. It was sure lonesome without you. I went out so far the Coast Guard hailed me and sent me back because there were German subs not far out and they could get in close to where I was sailing the Iris. They sank a oil frater just last week. Six miles off shore. You can bet there aren't many fishing boats sailing out of Mass. or Conn,

or Maine. From now until this war ends I guess I'll just keep the Iris tied to the dock. Maybe I'll take her out sometimes, just to let her feel the wind.

It's Dec. and it's cold and we have fires and last night Lucy and Tony and Mom and Dad and me roasted wieners. Dad said let's not listen to the 6 o'clock news tonight let's just eat these wieners and think good thots. We all did. Later on we all admitted our good thots were about you. Hurry up and end this war Olly.

I'm at the end of the space I have to write in.

Love

Your brother Alex

I sure do miss you Olly.

Let us in. Let us in, Alex.

Alex tried to select individual snowflakes approaching the window and follow their flight until they tapped at the glass and melted. Each one made its plea for all the others.

Let us in, let us in, Alex.

Tap, tap. Hundreds of taps. Thousands. Millions.

"Let us in, let us in."

The silence and warmth in this bedroom that had once been Oliver's and the attention to the gentle flow of snow made him drowsy. Outside the thin windowpane, he knew, the air was cold enough to freeze his eyelashes. The flakes of snow, usually so soft and wet, so silent, now struck the glass like tiny fragments of metal. *Tap, tap, tap.* They did not melt and disappear as they had earlier in the day. Frozen, solid, they were accumulated along each crosspiece in the window, forming stripes of white, puffy cotton.

Still at the window, almost hypnotized by the falling snow, Alex absently reached out to touch the edge of the Pequod High pennant tacked to the wall. On Saturdays like this, before the war, he would come into the room to lie on the bed. Oliver, standing at the window, would gaze out across the field at the coast and the always-heaving sea.

“The very best place in the whole world, Alex.”

How many times had Oliver said that? Fifty? A hundred?

Yes, this was the very best place in the world.

The field leading from the front porch down to the cliff had yielded to the snow, permitting itself to be covered with whiteness. But the naked granite rocks rising from the pebbled beach, as well as the dark beach itself, scorned the snow, refusing to retain even the most obstinate flakes. Of course the tides and the windswept mist helped, washing beach and rocks every few hours. Not even the gulls or terns dared perch for more than a minute to rest or scout food in the great sweep of the sea.

Farther up from the house, across the field toward Pequod Road, the frozen earth had accepted and held its snow since early December. Beyond the road, the yards and roofs of Pequod, still holding earlier deposits that had refused to dissolve, showed yesterday's layer of white above the darker, older snow. The fishing boats at the ends of the docks, tugging at their anchors and ropes, appeared to be seeking escape from the winds and waves and snow.

Alex left the window and sat on the bed he'd inherited when Oliver went into the army. He could still hear the snowflakes tapping at the window, but he was interested in other sounds. Real sounds. The sounds of voices. He stretched the length of the bed and reached out to the domed Atwater-Kent his father had restored just for him so he could listen to the radio at night before he fell asleep.

His sister Lucy hadn't approved.

“I say he'll just listen to the war news and have nightmares.”

“Well,” his father had replied, “I say he’ll have nightmares if he doesn’t listen. What do you say, Alex?”

“I say I’d sure like to have the radio in my room, Dad. You can come in and listen to it, Lucy, whenever you want.”

Lucy’s response had been a wink and a grin and a kiss, which Alex pretended to duck, blown from her hand.

“I’ll come in and play Glenn Miller or Tommy Dorsey,” Lucy said. “If you’re nice to me, I’ll teach you to dance.”

Alex reduced the volume so his mother and father, who were having a rare Saturday-afternoon nap in their bedroom down the hall, wouldn’t wake up. He caught the station knob between thumb and forefinger and rolled it gently, moving through a variety of voices. Twelve o’clock. Time for the noon news. The latest war reports.

Guadalcanal...the First Cavalry...General MacArthur vows...the Japanese Admiralty declared today...reports of German advances in the Ardennes...

There!

He rolled the knob back and forth for the best reception. American forces in Germany...the Ardennes—that was what he’d been searching for.

The enemy is employing considerable armor and is progressing westward. Our air force remains grounded because of the weather...

Maybe there’d be news about the 101st Airborne. Maybe there’d be an interview with Oliver. That happened sometimes. A combat reporter would find a rifleman or a machine gunner from some little town and would relay the man’s voice across the ocean to the plains of Kansas or Iowa or clear across the continent to California. Just last week Alex had heard an interview with a Corporal Clayton Shields from some tiny town called Occidental, California. Three weeks ago, a private, a scout in the Third Division named Walter Abercrombie, had talked about being homesick for his family in Mystic, Connecticut. He

couldn't wait to get back to skiing and ice skating in the mountains and on the ponds of Connecticut.

Mystic was less than ten miles from Pequod. Maybe Sergeant Oliver Kellar from Pequod, Connecticut, would be interviewed soon. It could happen.

...In gaining this degree of surprise, the enemy is favored by the weather. For some days, aerial reconnaissance has been impossible, and without aerial reconnaissance, it is impossible to determine the locations and movements of major reserves in the rear of the German lines.

Would Oliver, when he came home, talk about his war adventures? Would he be different? Had the war changed him? He'd been slightly wounded a month ago, receiving a Purple Heart medal, but he'd gone right back into battle. Would he still want to go fishing and hiking? Would he still grab Alex and throw him on the ground and wrestle with him? Fishing and hiking and wrestling were fun. Did war make you want never to have fun again? He thought of all the war movies he'd seen. No one in those movies laughed much, no one seemed to have fun.

Would the world, Alex wondered, ever be at peace again?

Peace meant there was no war. Peace meant fun, not just dark sadness, grim despair. The movies and the radio programs and the newspapers would no longer be filled with the words *bomb* and *kill* and *death*. Peace. No war.

Alex had to work hard to remember when the radio and the newspapers and the movies and the conversations at home as well as at Lucy's café and the classes at school were not concerned with the war. War! *The War!*

Of course Alex wanted the war to end, but he had to admit to a touch of disappointment, perhaps even regret. With the war ending soon, he himself, Alex Kellar, would not have had a chance to prove his own bravery, to prove his own loyalty to his country. He would not have had a chance to kill those evil people trying to control the world.

Those evil people.

“What is the enemy called?” Miss Guthrie, the sixth-grade teacher, had asked. “The name they go by?”

Alex’s was the only arm to rise.

“Alex?”

“The Nazis.”

“Is that right, class?”

Howard Lynn said, “The Japs.”

“Nazis and Japs. Is that the right answer? We...the nations we’re allied with...allied with...we’re called the Allied Powers. The Allies. They—the enemy—they’re called what?”

Alex: “The Axis powers. Germany and Japan and Italy.”

“Correct. Good for you, Alex.”

Correct, yes. But for Alex, the enemy—the real, the only enemy—was those gray-uniformed, steel-helmeted soldiers trying to kill his brother over there in Germany, those same soldiers Oliver was trying to kill. Those Nazis. Germans were called Nazis.

“Mom, what’s it called when two things, two words, mean the same thing?”

This had been at the supper table. It would have to have been a Saturday or Sunday night because his mother and father were home for supper only on weekends. During the week, they worked the night shift at the submarine base in New London, leaving home at four o’clock.

His mother had said, “They’re called synonyms.”

“*Germans* is a synonym for *Nazis*. Right?”

His mother and father, and his sister Lucy, and Tony, Lucy’s boyfriend, wondered about that for a while, even argued about it. Were all Germans Nazis? All Nazis Germans? Were Italian or Japanese soldiers Nazis? They didn’t live in Germany.

Tony said, “The Italians, they’re called Fascists. But, hey, I’m Italian. I tried to get in the army, I wanted to fight in Italy for the good old USA. My father hates Mussolini. Calls him a crook.”

The argument—well, it wasn't really an argument—went on until it was time for Lucy and Tony to leave. They were driving to New London to see *Winged Victory*, a new movie with Dana Andrews.

"I'm using my last gas ration stamp for the month," Tony said, winking at Lucy. "That shows how much I love you."

Alex groaned and pretended he was about to vomit, but his mother and father beamed. Lucy pushed Tony's shoulder.

"You're full of gas," she said.

2

Alex stood at the window. The gray cumulus clouds balanced on the eastern horizon seemed unwilling to move toward the shore, but they were not unwilling to puff themselves higher and higher, inflating their bulk with darkness.

Two o'clock. In an hour, he'd have to pick up his papers and start delivering them to the houses on his route. The papers would be thinner today, Saturday, than they'd been yesterday, but the storm promised to be more severe. He probably wouldn't be able to reach the Strobles' house. Or the Blascos'. Well, no matter what the weather was like, he would be sure to get the Kilroys their paper. The radio and the newspaper were the old ladies' only links to the outside world.

Alex snapped on his high galoshes, wrapped himself in sweaters and a jacket, and tramped through knee-high snow down Pequod Road to Larry Cobb's house. It took about a minute to convince Larry that, even though Christmas vacation had just begun, there might be some kids

from their class at the playground. They could tramp out a circle in the snow and play fox and geese. No teachers, no janitors, no little kids. Just the eighth-graders, all of them celebrating their last winter at Pequod Elementary. Larry called it Peapod.



The playground was empty. The snow stretched like clean, white cotton across the flat plane of the yard, although in the shadowed corners where the sun never reached there were drifts as high as their hips.

They clawed up the brick facings to peer through the iced windows. As they chased each other through the snow, in and out of the swings, they grabbed and rattled the chains. With lengths of fallen branches, they took turns breaking icicles from every roofline they could reach. The playground's snow was no longer unblemished.

Alex led the way to the cliff above the rocky coastline.

"Look at those clouds." He pointed out to sea. Lower now, as if a giant, unseen hand were pressing them from above, the clouds seemed interested suddenly in trying to reach the shore. They were tumbling forward slowly across the dark-green waves.

"Storm comin'," Larry said.

"Want to help me deliver my papers? We could finish before it hits."

"I don't know," Larry said. "I'm supposed to be home early. Pap'll put the belt to me if I'm late again."

"You won't be late. The first half of the route, working together, we'll move fast. We could even pick up enough time to go on the rocks if we want to. I bet yesterday's storm brought in lots of good stuff."

Alex knew the promise of a treasure hunt along the coast would be too much for Larry to resist. The one way he could escape his father's belt was to bring home a special bit of loot carried to shore from some unfortunate boat.

"It's gonna snow for ten years," Alex said, pointing again to the east. "Look at the size of those clouds. They're

moving faster. Come on, Lare. We work together, we can do it.”

The clouds, stuffed to their edges with blackness and not at all intimidated by the pounding surf, seemed to be racing each other westward toward the land.

3

Eighteen Courier-Journals left, only four of them folded and ready to be tossed.

Alex eased the canvas bag from his shoulder, dropped it at his feet, and leaned forward to stretch the ache out of his back. Together, he and Larry had made more progress than he'd expected they would. Of course Larry wanted a chance at the loot that might be waiting among the rocks, but it wasn't just the loot that had convinced him to help. It was one more chance to demonstrate his gratitude for Alex's kindness.

Alex was just about the only kid at school who did not tease Larry. Everyone else called him Blubber and Blimp and Lard Bucket, and worse. Alex called him Larry. Not Fat Larry but Larry. Or Lare. Limited in vocabulary and limited even more in the ability or willingness to put his feelings into words, Larry almost thanked Alex for thinking he could help.

Still bent, feeling the ache escaping, Alex considered the rocks he'd already crossed. Some were larger than houses,

others larger than two houses put together. In the east, between him and the horizon, the snow was falling faster, thicker, not swirling now but falling almost in straight vertical lines. Balanced on top of the rock, Alex tried to see inside the snow mist, tried to locate Larry among the rocks. He checked his wristwatch and sat on the stuffed canvas bag. He'd wait five minutes. If Larry didn't show up in five minutes, he'd retrace his steps and try to find him.

Alex lifted his body just enough to free one of the papers. Before the front page disappeared into the settling snow, he read aloud the banner headline at the top of the page:

9 MORE DAYS UNTIL CHRISTMAS

The headline across the news portion:

Ammunition Shortage In German Army

He would have read the story, or part of it, if at that moment he hadn't heard Larry's call. The figure making its way across the rocks, its broad, red face streaming water, could have been a solitary sea beast washed ashore by the storm, but a mittened hand waved and a round, red mouth called, "Alex, hey, Alex, wait up!"

Alex shouted, "Let's go, Lare. We'll get hot chocolate at the Kilroys."

Alex estimated that working together, and moving as fast as they had until now, they could complete the route in fifteen minutes. It was four-fifteen right now, maybe four-thirty. If they didn't accept the Kilroys' invitation to stop in, he could be home in time to hear the five-o'clock news report on the radio.

When the red hair and the freckled face appeared, Alex shouldered his canvas bag and glanced down before he leapt

to the next rock, expecting to see treasure no more exciting than what they'd seen so far—a piece of lobster pot or a cork float or scraps of useless lumber. But there, tucked between two rocks, lay a load of laundry.

He scrambled down, intending to hide it from Larry's view until the last minute.

The dark coat was visible first. Then a pair of dark trousers. Two black socks. A shoe. A shoe in a bag of laundry?

A shoe. A single shoe. But two socks. And a trouser leg torn along the seam, exposing a blue leg and a fragment of underwear. A blue leg. A bloated, glistening blue leg.

Alex clutched at a protruding lump of rock. The shout escaped after three tries.

“Larry!”

He slid free from the canvas strap and slowly lowered himself to his stomach. Larry arrived, panting from exertion and dripping water from galoshes and jacket. A small pool formed around his feet. His voice was almost a whisper.

“Is it real, Alex?”

Alex ignored the water lapping at his galoshes. The side of the man's face that was visible looked as if a prankster had been here earlier to paint the skin dark blue. The left eye pondered the left hand, fixed like a chicken's claw before his face. The right eye, the entire right side of the man's face—cheek and nose and chin—was embedded in a cushion of sand that sucked water in and thrust it out, raising the head in the process, then lowering it, then raising it.

Larry struggled down the last three or four feet of rock and stopped directly behind Alex. With both hands clinging tightly to the belt of Alex's jacket, Larry matched his moves, even stepping into his footprints. Satisfied finally that the hand would never move again, Alex leaned forward until his face hovered just inches above the black suit coat.

“He's dead. We found a dead man, Lare.”

“A...a dead man. He doesn't look like anyone from Pequod.”

Fat Larry's voice sounded as if he'd been running fast for several hours.

Alex tried to speak casually, but his voice had to fight its way out of his throat.

"He's not a fisherman or a sailor."

"He's not a fisherman or a...How do you know that, Alex?"

"He's wearing a dark suit and a white shirt and a necktie. And dress shoes."

"One dress shoe."

Alex nudged the body with the toe of his right boot.

"Maybe he fell off a liner," Larry said. "Maybe he tried to swim ashore. He didn't make it. The tide brought him in."

"He'd be rotten by now. He'd smell bad."

"I ain't gettin' close enough to see how he smells, Alex."

"He wasn't very smart," Alex said. "Trying to swim in that sea, in a storm. Without taking off his shoes or his suit coat."

He knelt next to the body, gripped the edge of the coat between thumb and forefinger, and snapped the coat open. He probed the inside pocket. Empty. He tugged at the right rear pocket of the trousers until he succeeded in withdrawing a soggy wallet.

Larry gasped.

"Look at all that money."

Five twenties, three tens, three fives, four ones.

"One hundred forty-nine dollars," Alex said. "He must be rich, carrying that much money on him."

Larry whistled.

"One hundred and forty-nine bucks. What Pap would do with that."

Alex pulled out a driver's license.

"George H. Barrows, one-seventeen West One Hundred-Twelfth Street, New York City." A Social Security card had the same name and the number 129-81-1821. And three photographs: an attractive woman with long, dark hair and a slight smile; the same woman with a ten- or twelve-

year-old girl (they were holding hands, standing in what looked like a big city); and the little girl, on her knees at the side of a large Irish setter, hugging the dog.

Larry stepped back from the corpse and looked around, as if expecting someone.

“We oughta get going, Alex. This is too spooky. This dead guy layin’ here and those pictures. They’re probably home waitin’ for him. Let’s go. But what about the money? We aren’t gonna leave it here, are we?”

Alex dropped the wallet into his canvas paper-bag.

“We better go tell the police.”

“Hey, let’s split the money, Alex.”

“What about the police? They’ll know.”

“They’ll never know. How could they? Okay, we leave ten bucks, fifteen maybe. That’s what most guys would carry. A hundred and forty-nine bucks. You know how long you’d have to carry papers to make one hundred and forty-nine bucks, Alex?”

What was half of \$149? \$74.50. He’d have to carry papers for more than a year to make \$74.50. Alex removed the wallet from his bag and held the money. It was soggy, heavy in his hand. He shoved it all into Larry’s hand.

“You take it. I don’t want any.”

Larry protested, insisting that Alex deserved half. He’d found the dead man, he’d even touched the guy, he’d gone into the pocket for the wallet. When Alex shook his head, seeming not to hear him, or to agree with him, Larry said, “Okay,” and stuffed the money in his pocket.

“A hundred and forty-nine smackeroots. I’ll say we found it in a can under a rock. No, in a box that washed ashore. How’s that sound, Alex?”

“The police station’s five miles away,” Alex said.

“My house is closer than yours. If we had a phone we could go there and call the station.”

“The café.”

Larry agreed. “Yeah. The café. Why?”

Alex started running, the canvas bag bouncing on his hip. Lucy would be working at the café. She’d know what to do.

Lucy did know what to do. She called the police. Alex and Larry led Lucy, the two officers, and four curious customers who canceled their chowder-and-burger orders back along the asphalt road and down Perez Wharf to the rocks.

4

After the cops and the four men carried the sheet-wrapped body to the pickup truck that served as Pequod's ambulance, Chief Burnham asked Alex and Larry several questions. The boys responded truthfully to every question except one.

"Did you see a suitcase or wallet or anything like that?"

Alex seemed to be thinking, to be remembering. Actually, he was debating the possibility of turning over the wallet. But it would be empty. Without even a single dollar. He'd surely be suspected of taking whatever money had been there. While he was constructing the probable question-and-answer routine, Larry piped up, quite clearly and emphatically, "We didn't find anything. We just wanted to get outta there. We never saw a dead man before. Right, Alex?"

Lucy put her arm around Alex.

"You did the right thing, hon. Me, I would have probably fainted right here on the rocks."

When the crowd drove off, Alex and Larry started running to finish delivering the papers. Few of the remaining

customers on the route complained. The news had preceded them, so that at each house Alex and Larry were compelled to reenact their adventure.

Snow was falling heavily as they approached the McCafreys', just below the Kilroys' house. They were pushing through the snow when a girl's voice behind them called out, "Larry, wait."

Larry's sister Amelia caught up with them.

"Lawrence, you better come home. Mom's mad. I bet you get a beating. They kept supper for you. I bet you go to bed without any supper at all. And wait till Pap sees your wet clothes. Boy, will you get whipped."

"Wanna bet?" Larry laughed. He raced ahead of his sister, both of them slipping and sliding in the snow. "See you, Alex. Don't find any more dead men." Alex heard him laughing. He was shouting at Amelia, "I bet he doesn't whip me. How much you wanna bet? A hundred dollars?"

The Kilroys' house was the last one on the route. Alex entered the gate, prepared to insist he didn't have time for the usual hot chocolate tonight. He approached the stairway on the outside wall of the house leading to the upstairs entry, but Rosie Kilroy charged out and down the stairs to grab him by his shoulders and hustle him across the yard, back the way he'd come.

Usually, on such winter days, she was wrapped in jackets and scarves and overshoes, but now she was only wearing her tattered old housecoat and bedroom slippers.

"Take your paper back. I don't want you delivering your old *Courier-Journal* here anymore. And don't deliver my food from Critchlow's. And you bring any fish I'll stuff them down your throat. I hate fish. So's my mother."

Shouting, waving whichever arm happened to be free, Rosie pushed Alex clear to the crippled gate. Then she whirled to pick her way through the jungle of frozen, stunted shrubs and fragments of masonry and lumber and rusted tools. It was hard to know if she was weeping or shouting as she climbed the stairs. At the top landing, the kitchen door opened before she reached it. It permitted her skinny body entry, then it slammed shut.

Alex kicked the gate as he passed it. She must have gone crazy. People at Joe Critchlow's store said it was just a matter of time. Maybe it had happened.

He rolled up his empty canvas bag, wondering who would now do Rosie's chores on Saturdays. Who'd deliver the groceries? He'd tell his father not to bring the Kilroys' fish anymore. They brought a bit of their catch every weekend, but if she didn't want it, well, his mother would find a use for it. Why would she have said she hated fish? It wasn't true. His father and Oliver and he himself had been bringing the old women fish for as long as he could remember.

As he shifted the rolled bag in his hands, something fell to the ground. Except for one black corner, it all but disappeared in the snow. The wallet.

Alex stared at it. He'd forgotten it. Its appearance reminded him of his having committed what could be called a crime. *Could* be if he was found out.

He certainly didn't want to keep the wallet. In fact, whatever wrong he might have committed could be corrected now by giving the wallet to the police.

But wait. Both he and Larry had already said there had been no wallet. By now Larry had dropped the money into his father's hands. Chief Burnham would be suspicious of an empty wallet. A man dressed in a suit carrying an empty wallet? No one would believe him.

Alex's eyes focused on an uncapped oil drum he'd passed and ignored a hundred times. Quickly, easily, naturally, he picked up the wallet and dropped it in. It remained on top of a thick puck of ice. He wrapped his hand in the canvas bag and struck the ice with the heel of his hand, but it didn't break. His cold fingers dug about in his pocket until he found his penknife. He chopped at the ice and struck it again with his fist. The ice broke, and the wallet dropped into the dark muck. Nobody would ever find it. But he'd lost his knife in the process, the knife Oliver had given him.

Alex looked back at the Kilroys' house. Upstairs, in what he knew to be a spare bedroom, the curtains were parted. A face hovered at the glass. It disappeared as the curtains fell back into place. But he could still see, behind the curtain, the features of the face. It wasn't Rosie or her mother. It was a man. The face moved. And disappeared.

No man had lived in that house since Rosie's father had died before Alex was born.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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