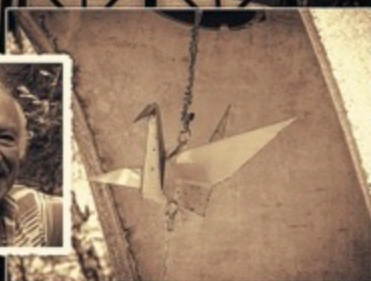


# WARS AND PEACES



CHESTER AARON

# Wars and Peaces



The Collected Stories  
of

# Chester Aaron

## Also by Chester Aaron

*Garlic Kisses and Tasty Hugs*  
*The Marriage of Mushrooms and Garlic*  
*(with Malcolm Clark)*

*An American Ghost*  
*Alex, Who Won His War*  
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WARS AND PEACES

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# Dedication

This book is devoted to Thomas  
Farber, who has been here  
whenever I needed a brother

## ❁ Table of Contents ❁

The Scent of Thyme.....	1
The Size of It.....	14
Winterswijk.....	55
Thirty Minutes in Bologna .....	74
Oh, Babe.....	93
Here's to You, Chief Joseph .....	104
Nick's Star.....	127
Shuzoku.....	149
The End of Summer .....	176
The End Is the Beginning.....	194
Afterword .....	198



**The Scent  
of  
Thyme**



The scent of wild thyme swept down past the men on the hillside, crossed the meadow and settled in Sergeant Sabini's mouth and throat. The sergeant stopped writing his letter, but he did not look up. He concentrated on nursing the hesitant memory closer. Along with the scents of sweet basil and garlic, the scent of thyme had shaped and colored his childhood. He yearned for that childhood now.

To distract himself from looking up, he pressed down harder with his pen, and he wrote another line.

I've been in Italy almost a year and I haven't tasted pesto once. Right now I can smell thyme. It's in the wind coming down from the mountains.

The tug of memory promised a pain so delicate but so severe he knew his heart would ache if he yielded. To escape the memories, the heartache, he forced his eyes up from the page. There was the line of men on the hillside, half of them from his own 2nd Platoon.

He had considered joining the men when the first few had left their tanks and crossed the meadow and dashed up the hill. He found little comfort in the fact that he had not run as they had. Walking offered a dignity the men could have misinterpreted as boredom. Sergeant Sabini was not bored. Being human, he was often angry, almost as often frustrated, too frequently these days on the edge of terror.

The men probably never thought of him as human. He was controlled, authoritative, consistently the reliable pla-



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toon sergeant. None of them would be able to call up an incident in which he had demonstrated fear or even doubt.

It had been that consistent, never-failing authority that had dissolved—or, at least, eased fear or doubt—in the most reluctant member of the 2nd platoon. There had been several reluctant members during the ten months his unit had been in action, many of them dead now or back in the States in hospitals. A fortunate few were home. None of this explained to Sergeant Sabini his refusal to run across the meadow to join the line.

He was a few years older than most of the men. Did that—his age plus his ten months of dreary combat—did that help him endure privation and pain and bodily hungers? Hell, he was only 27, and some of the men in that hillside line had fought against Rommel in Africa before he'd even been drafted.

Because every vehicle and weapon had been thoroughly cleaned and had passed inspection that morning, company and battalion officers had not intervened when they'd received the news that men from the 1st and 2nd platoons of Baker Company were crossing the meadow to take their positions in the line that reached up the hillside.

The war was almost over. Almost. Such distraction, the officers said, could only benefit men withdrawn for the moment from combat. Although the latest reports promised the war's end in a week or two, perhaps even a day or two, the possibility of ambushes and shootouts remained. What were the figures Captain Long had announced? In 1918, something like three hundred men had died on the last day of combat.

Sergeant Sabini, settled now on the hood of a half-track near his tank, tried to appreciate the peace and quiet, the almost-warm sunlight. He'd begun this letter an hour ago, and he'd completed less than a page. His sister Grazia would

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read and reread the letter to his parents as well as to his uncles and aunts and nephews and nieces.

The thyme. That was why he had interrupted the writing.

Exquisitely painful images had been born of the scent. In the peace and quiet and sunlight, he closed his eyes and sought to impose those images into an acceptable pattern. There was the kitchen—the polished linoleum floor, the black stove covered with steaming aromatic pots, the noisy refrigerator, the large table that, night and day, beckoned all, the white porcelain sink and wooden drainboard. Here in the Apennines, on the hood of a US Army half-track, the sergeant felt the rim of the sink biting into his belly as he, the boy, bent forward to accept the coarse washcloth on his face, probing inside his ears and around his nose and down inside his shirt collar. He heard his mother's heavily accented English: *Lorenzo, maybe we grow potatoes in Anthony's ears?*

And above the flow of the accordion music, his father's voice, even more heavily accented: *Garlic! Garlic in the ears, no worms.*

A weak cheer came from the hillside, a second cheer; and the sergeant's mother, father, childhood, disappeared. No peace now, no quiet. Even the sunlight seemed chilled.

Sergeant Sabini closed the letter inside his writing box. He should cross the meadow and climb the hill and reclaim the men from his platoon. He should order them to police the area or re-clean the small arms.

The low voice of the padre distracted him.

"Well, Anthony, I'm pleased to find you here and not up there." The padre had approached the half-track from the tank area in the rear. "Hey, are you okay, Anthony?"

"I don't know. I feel sort of sick. It must be those powdered eggs."

"Take deep breaths through your nose. The medic tells me that helps."

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He did as the padre suggested and pretended he felt better.

“I almost went up there, Padre.”

The padre shook his head in an obvious effort to dissuade him from confessing.

“I did. I almost went up there with my men.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I’m going to bring them down. There’s plenty of work they can do down here.”

The padre placed his soft hand on the sergeant’s shoulder.

“Anthony, you’ve won too many battles to lose the last one. From what I hear at Division it could end tomorrow. We might be home in a week or two. Home, Anthony. Hoboken. New Jersey. U.S.A.”

Why wasn’t the padre upset? How could a priest be so indulgent? This was the padre’s battle more than it was the sergeant’s. The sergeant would be going home to be a bricklayer, like his father and his uncles, but the padre...

The padre would always be preaching sermons about right and wrong, about sin, about cowardice and courage. Maybe the padre was a coward. The sergeant thought, but could not say, *This isn’t a battle, Padre, and I won’t lose; I’ll simply go up there and give an order.*

With his back against the half-track’s radiator, Sergeant Sabini had a direct view of the hillside and the line of men that snaked up through the trees. The half-track’s grill seemed to be holding him. He couldn’t, for some reason, just simply go, just simply give an order.

“I wish I hadn’t wanted to go up there, Padre.”

When the padre wrapped an arm about the sergeant’s shoulder, the sergeant wanted to throw it off.

“You’re human,” the padre said. “So are they.” He added, “unfortunately” not quite under his breath.

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“You could stop them,” Sergeant Sabini said.

The padre shook his head.

“You grant me greater authority than they would. Remember, many of those men are not Catholics. Up there, I’d have less status than a clerk.

“Ignore it, Anthony. Come on. I’ll bless the kitchen, and the cooks will give us some hot coffee.” The padre’s eyes followed the sergeant’s gaze. “Anthony, Anthony, why torture yourself? Is it worse than other things we’ve seen? Yesterday, I gave confession to an eighteen-year-old. A child. From Scranton. My home town. He had no face, so he couldn’t talk. He died holding my finger. Have you ever seen a baby’s hand holding on to its mother’s finger? That’s how he died. Is this worse?”

“Yes, it’s worse. I’m going up, Father.”

The padre made no move to stop him or to accompany him.

It was surprisingly warm for a spring day in these mountains. A corporal near the road was carving a woman out of a bar of Ivory soap. It wasn’t really spring yet, the corporal said. Someone else said it was already May, wasn’t it? Another man said, yeah, but this was the Apennines. Didn’t spring come late in the Apennines?

The line had moved so slowly that several men were giving up and sauntering back down the hill to the meadow where their tanks and half-tracks waited. Two of the men from the 1st Platoon, who were comparing the qualities of the slow-fire American and the rapid-fire German machine guns, did not think it necessary to stop and chat with those they were leaving behind, those continuing to wait in line.

At the edge of the grove, a gunner from the sergeant’s own tank, a man dubbed Eagle Eye, had organized a card game. He invited Sergeant Sabini to join them. The sergeant declined the offer, but he did pause, thinking this might be an

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appropriate place and time to order his men back to the meadow.

The muscles in his throat and chest grew taut, as they always did when he had to order men into combat. His heart was no longer in it, and an order without conviction, he had learned, was not much more than a plea. He knew without having learned it that pleading was not appropriate for a man respected as a leader, who made quick decisions and gave clear commands, who exposed himself to even greater risks than the men who followed his orders.

Sergeant Sabini could now see the three or four men at the head of the line. They were standing inside the grove of trees. Down out of the grove, past the men waiting there, came a new wave of thyme scent, so thick this time that the sergeant could taste it on his tongue. Once more the kitchen appeared, and the figure of his mother, face flushed, at the stove, and the voice of his father as he bent and swayed over his accordion, the same accordion the sergeant's father, as a dashing young man, had played in the dusty piazza in the center of Monte Groppo.

The sergeant's grandfather had brought the instrument from Capri. Four generations of young boys had brushed the back of that accordion with fingertips, feeling each cut and swirl of the carved *Sabini* and the figure *1845* after the word *May*. A Sabini possession for one hundred years. A century. One of twenty-four centuries since the soldiers of the Republic, requiring wives, had swarmed into these Sabine hills to collect the women.

Two weeks before, Sergeant Sabini had been wandering through recently liberated Florence. At the Loggio dei Lanzi, an aged guard, breaking the rules for this American soldier named Sabini, had led the sergeant into the sand-bagged cellar to remove the structures that had protected the sculpture during the presence of the Germans.

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There was Giambalogna's *Rape of the Sabine Women*.

The guard, older than the sergeant's father, murmured something in Italian, an inaudible phrase that might have been offered to soothe a frightened child.

Sergeant Sabini remained with the marble sculpture for an hour. With the watchful guide at his side, he walked around the struggling figures. The old guard started to protest when the sergeant reached toward the marble; but then, recognizing pain, the guard nodded and drew back into the shadows.

Sergeant Sabini cupped the face of one of the women in his hand. History rushed from marble to flesh, blood poured from flesh to marble, and the sergeant heard the screams, the pleas for mercy, the curses, the promises of vengeance.

That was two weeks ago, but here on the hillside the tips of Sergeant Sabini's fingers could still feel that screaming marble mouth.

The sergeant continued up the hill, out of the range of the soldier's voices, and he entered the grove of trees. There had been little combat in this area, so there was no visible destruction. No broken or charred skeletons of trees or people or animals. He wondered if Monte Groppo had been spared as well. Was the house in which his parents and grandparents and great-grandparents been born still standing? Was the piazza still dusty, or had it been paved or stoned over?

Although he had never been there, the sergeant knew the geography of the village as if he had roamed its streets all his life. The memories that had become stories that had, in turn, evolved into legends had followed him from boyhood through adolescence into manhood. Often, when his mother had given voice to her own memories, Sergeant Sabini had known the words before they were spoken.

"At night, if it was no clouds, we children climb to the top of mountains. We see, other side, the lights of Lucca."

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She would squint as if she were a child again, peering into the darkness, hearing the stories again as if they had happened that day, the stories of the Roman soldiers burning villages, killing men, stealing off with the screaming Sabine women.

“Sì, we see the lights of Lucca. Ah, *quella vista*.”

If he could get a pass, the sergeant had written her in today’s letter, he promised her he would visit Monte Gropo. He would borrow a camera. His mother and father would pore over those photographs, studying each one over and over again; they would argue about this or that road, this or that house, this or that old woman or man. They would wrap the photographs in soft paper and store them in a secret drawer and bring them out and hide them again so visiting grandchildren and nephews and nieces might see, finally, their own land. *Il bel’ paese*.

Sergeant Sabini, descending the hill, passed a cluster of men exchanging reminiscences of wives and children and girlfriends and parents. A rifleman from Hibbing, Minnesota, swore that once this war was over and he was home, he’d never pull on another uniform. Not even a mechanic’s, not even a bus driver’s.

Maybe on Armistice Day, a mortar man from Oakland, California, said, Maybe he’d wear his uniform that day. His father always put on his uniform from the other war and marched in the parade in San Francisco.

“I like that,” the mortar man said. “Walking down Market Street in an Armistice Day parade, me in my uniform, my old man in his. I’ll join the VFW, and we’ll go to meetings together.”

Back at the meadow, Sergeant Sabini knew the padre was avoiding him. Tomorrow, or whenever they next met, neither of them would talk about today.

By four o’clock, the breeze had turned cold. The puddles of water would be covered with ice before midnight; but now,

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about five miles away, the sun, punctured by the mountain peak, spilled a simmering red-orange light down the mountainside and over the meadow. In a sudden assault, the breeze hurled forward a heavy scent of thyme.

The line that had contained twenty or thirty men at noon contained only eight or ten men now.

By five o'clock, the sun had disappeared. The air was so cold, the men wore their heavy jackets and wool knit caps. A few wore gloves.

By six o'clock, the last man had come down the hillside. He joined the other men who'd finished supper, who were sitting around the fire still burning beneath the three large steel drums, and he convinced the cook to fill his mess-kit. He joined the other men sitting around the fire that was still burning beneath the three large steel drums.

An eight-day backlog of mail had been brought in that afternoon, and candies and cookies began circulating. Four privates, assigned the day's KP detail, began cleaning the steel drums that had contained the water for washing and rinsing mess-kits. Once cleaned, and filled with fresh water, the drums were ready to be heated for cleaning pots and pans and mess-kits after tomorrow's breakfast.

As the fires burned lower, several men climbed into their sleeping bags and others closed in around the drums, not just to keep warm but to use the fading light to help them read their mail for a second and third time.

Sergeant Sabini had received two letters, one from his sister and one from an aunt. His sister Grazia told him their mother and father were at Mass while she was writing her letter, praying for his safe return. His aunt Alicia, who had graduated from college and had traveled to Italy before the war, had been photographed in front of seventeen churches and six museums. For some reason, she'd not been able to visit Monte Groppo. It would be a shame, his sister Grazia



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wrote, if he were to leave Italy without visiting Monte Grop-  
po. It would be a shame, his aunt Alicia wrote him, if he  
were to leave Italy without visiting the Sistine Chapel and,  
in Florence, the *il Duomo*. She wrote it like that, as if *il* did  
not mean *the*.

Bent over his sister's letter for several minutes, Sergeant  
Sabini was barely aware of the flames performing their death  
dance beneath the steel drums. His father's fingers were too  
arthritic to play the accordion very much, his sister said, but  
he still tried. She named the various relatives who had come  
to supper Sunday night. Their mother had baked a huge fish  
and had made her famous polenta. She and her mother had  
cried because he'd not been there. His uncle Mario had played  
the accordion, and his father had admitted it wasn't too bad.

Sergeant Sabini desperately wished he were home. He'd  
never again be a young boy bending over a sink, his face and  
ears being scrubbed with a rough cloth clutched in his moth-  
er's hands. If he survived these last days—if these were the  
last days—he'd learn to play the accordion, and he'd teach his  
children when he married and had children, and they'd all  
play for his father, his children's grandfather.

One of the men asked everyone to listen while he re-  
cited a poem his wife had sent him. She'd clipped it out of  
the newspaper, the *Butler Eagle*. It had been written by a  
13-year-old girl.

After it's all over  
My brother will come home.  
He'll play with my dog, Clover,  
And I'll take out this poem  
And I'll say, Remember this poem?  
I sent it to you in 1945.  
The war's over and you're alive.



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About seven o'clock the woman came out of the grove of trees and down the hillside. Unable to stand erect, she slid her body sideways, like a crab, slightly dragging her right foot. Her cloth bag, filled with candy bars and bars of soap and tubes of toothpaste, clutched in her left hand, followed her, sliding along the ground.

She emerged from the shadows, groaning with each movement of her right foot. As she approached the steel drums, appealing to no one in particular, she grunted a husky, "*Acqua? Acqua?*"

The men near the steel drums moved away from her. A tall skinny machine-gunner from the 1st Platoon went to a tree where a Lister bag hung from a limb. He filled a glass jar with water and offered the jar to the woman, careful to withdraw his hand in time to avoid touching her fingers. She drank all the water, stopping once to sigh, once to groan faintly. She held out the empty jar to the machine-gunner, but he refused it, shaking his head. He pointed to the embers and mimed his suggestion. She should throw the jar beneath the drums.

Sergeant Sabini stood and held out his hand.

"*Il bicchiere, per favore,*" he said.

At the sound of his almost-whispered Italian, her dazed eyes took on a new life. For the astonished men who were watching, he said, "Give me the glass, please."

She placed the jar in his hand, and it seemed to him that their fingers remained in contact for hours.

"*Lei desidera ancora di acqua?*" For the men: "Would you like more water?"

Perhaps he only imagined it, but her back seemed to straighten. Her head came up; her open lips shaped a hint of a smile. She ran her muddy hand through her tangled hair as if she should at least try to make herself more presentable. With a groan, she let her back slump again.

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When he gave her the second glass of water she drank half of it, stopping only to say, “*Dolce, dolce—acqua dolce.*” After she drank the rest of the water, she returned the jar, and he took it. Their fingers touched again.

“*Grazie, signore,*” she said, gazing into his eyes. “*Molto grazie.*”

The sergeant lowered his eyes and turned away, knowing that if he did not, he would take her into his arms. Where, he wondered, staring into the embers beneath the drums, where would she sleep tonight? *Wait*, he would say, *I’ll get you a blanket.*

But when he looked up she was gone.

Sergeant Sabini left the men huddled in silence near the steel drums and once again climbed the hill. He passed the grove of trees, and at the top of the hill, he faced into the breeze. He smelled the thyme, stronger than ever, but he could see no lights of a city or a village. Off in the distance, there was a heavy roll not of thunder but of heavy artillery.

He let his body drop onto the cold wet grass; and, his head in his arms, Sergeant Sabini wept for the Sabine women.



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