

Paratime¹

*How many of our daydreams would darken into nightmares
if there seemed any danger of their coming true.*

Logan Pearsall Smith

Afterthought 1931

“**W**atch out!” When the jumpmaster screamed I pulled back my glove and looked at my watch. I guess it was all that training to follow orders – no matter how silly they might sound at the moment – and at that moment, for some inexplicable reason, I was concerned about time. At least more concerned about time than safety. Maybe because we’d been trained to find safety in the cover of darkness and the interior of the plane was so dark. But darkness tends to hide time as well, and I’d lost all track of it.

Just as I looked at my watch, the jumpmaster tapped my helmet. I looked up and read his silent lips as he pointed at the bag tethered to my leg, “Watch out.” I nodded and tugged it closer as he stepped past. I still think it’s odd, that at the time, straddling explosives didn’t cross my mind; I was thinking about time. I still am.

I was young then, but not like the rest in my platoon. Most were barely twenty. I was like the jumpmaster, pushing thirty. The years gave us an edge, or at least sharpened it. (Who hasn’t learned something in the past few years?) But the past few years had dulled me also. I had an uneasy idea that time was slipping away; the way the last grains of sand slip through an hourglass – the way paratroopers fall from a plane.

It was impossible to know what the others were thinking, but I imagined they, too, were counting the minutes. The fellow next to me sat motionless and silent, his arms jack-knifed over a mortar tube strapped to his chest. Suddenly he gave me an elbow and yelled through the engine’s din: “What’s the time?” I pulled down the edge of my jump glove, studied the luminous hands glowing an eerie green, then turned my head and called out, loudly, with slow deliberate words: “Twenty-three... fifty-two!”

We’d been flying for more than an hour and we’re approaching the halfway point. The atmosphere inside was like that outside, turbulent but quiet, save the soporific moan of the engines. Most of the troopers sat still, appearing more bored than scared. Some fell asleep ‘cause of the airsickness tablets, others simply ‘cause they hadn’t slept the night before.

Earlier that day, on the assembly field, everyone was wound-up tighter than a two-dollar clock: we cinched up our chutes and strapped on our gear tighter and tighter

¹ **para** • **noun** (informal) paratrooper. **prefix 1** adjacent to (Greek). **2** distinct from, but comparable to: *paramilitary*. **3** protection against (French).
time • **noun** the continued progress of existence in the past, present and future, regarded as a whole.

till nothing gave. Then we waited as time unwound. Some of the fellows sat alone, reading old letters or writing new ones. Others sat still and prayed in silence. Or squirmed constantly and swore aloud, tugging at their gear. Still others stood in gaggles, like edgy kids on a street corner, slapping backs with feigned laughter about warm beer and cold women; or laughed for real, as if they were having the time of their lives. But after we left England, after the wheels tucked up with a satisfying thud, after we got used to the droning engines and the solitary blackness, no one was laughing.

“Anyone want to buy a good watch?” Few heard me yell it, but I could tell from the pale cracks on their smudged faces that it brought a healthy sick-laugh.

None of my brothers would have bought that watch any more than I would have sold it. Dad gave it to me. Right after his first heart attack. I guess he knew death was just a matter of time. I knew it too; I just didn’t believe it. None of us did, not really, until that evening. Anyway, it was Dad’s; I simply watched over it.

I liked the idea of identifying time with family, like a grandfather clock. It made time personal. Maybe that’s what Einstein meant by time being relative – a relation.

I wish I could say that simply having that watch kept Dad alive; but honestly, it had just the opposite effect. I remember thinking that night, heading for France, that relative on my wrist was like the one in my heart. Like any heart, and every clock, the ticking eventually stops. It always does. But we rarely expect the moment. That’s just the way death is: unpredictable.

I don’t know how long I stared with a kind of earnest vacancy, oblivious to the others, who, more than likely, were doing the same. Our time had skipped a million heartbeats. We sat on wooden benches, two rows facing one another, perpetually silent. The roaring engines made one deaf and made speech a clumsy effort of shouting, the words like distant rustles of leaves. We were like old men on a park bench, gazing at the emptiness of a town square, as though time had ceased to exist anymore.

I leaned my head back, shut my eyes. At first there was nothing but fear and foreboding. My head ached, my hands shook, my heart beat irregularly. Sand slipped slowly through the hourglass and every grain rested in my hands, not God’s. They say there are no atheists in a foxhole, but I can tell you, in that sepulchral darkness, litany seemed famously useless. I recall praying – I suspect we all did – but I wasn’t praying for my life. I called out for God to save me from screwing up. Looking back, there’s an inexplicable sense of detachment to that moment – the way you recall a nightmare or funny dream. At the time, however, it wasn’t a matter of happiness, sadness, life, death. Only time made sense, and a man’s mission.

Suddenly I remembered: I opened my eyes and glanced at the jump-lights by the door. No surprise: both lights were off. But I saw the jumpmaster throw something out the door – to this day I wonder what. He caught my eyes like a thief caught in the act, then continued to stare uneasily out the exit.

An engine coughed twice and nearly choked. A trooper up front smiled, not at the choking engine but at his neighbor’s mocking hands, banking over like wingtips. The trooper next to me thumbed his rosary, as if counting each bead. I noticed these things mechanically then glanced at my watch. Only five past. Time was hanging.

I looked forward to the exit. Beyond the silhouetted jumpmaster, in the distance far below, as far as I could see, a thousand ships streamed creamy wakes across a black horizontal vastness. Above them, an armada of C-47s hung in space like an endless school of drab little fish suspended in a moonlit aquarium.

I don't know how long I just sat there and gazed at the magnitude of it all. All of it dwarfed by the heavenly pincushion above. It dawned on me that this was going to be the most memorable sight I'd ever witness in life – an apogee of time and place on par with biblical miracles: Moses parting the Red Sea, Lazarus rising from the grave, the Resurrection....

But then, for some inexplicable reason, I experienced an epiphany. I realized that this moment and this place were the same, inseparable: *How can one separate time from space?* I thought about home: the way Dad talked to himself when he pruned that prickly hedge; how Mom glowed in church when she sang "Sweet Jesus I'm coming home to you"; the slam of the screen door a half-second before my brother yelled, "I'm home!" I just couldn't separate the moment from the place.

Cascading thoughts began to tailspin. Maybe because I had slept so little, and had eaten less. *Space and time are not two quantities; they're a single quality. We feel them as one sensation, like fatigue or hunger, but we think of them – even measure them! – as if they're separate objects of food.* I remember the image of a clock looking like a pie, with hours sliced away. And a knife cleaving lines of latitude and longitude on a pan of cornbread... Mom serving a square of France with a pat of melting butter: I thought, "What a delicious map." And on the p in map I woke up.

Where is it? The question triggered a fear that's hard to describe now. It was like being lost for a moment. I padded my leg pockets but felt only bulk. I tugged off a jump glove and explored deeply inside: flashlight, chocolate bars, matches, cleaning patches, spoon...

Damn it.

Panic set in and I pulled the other glove off with my teeth. Now both hands probed frantically: cigarettes, compass, smoke grenade, socks ...

Please, God!

Suddenly I felt the silk map. My steeled body softened and I leaned my head back. I pulled my gloves back on. Slowly, taking control again, tugging the last one carefully with my teeth, the way a bitch picks up a pup to set everything in place. *Don't second-guess yourself now. It's too late. Just think about something else. Something to kill time...*

The irony tickled me, but I didn't smile. So little time left, why destroy it? I wondered where that expression came from, "killing time". I could see capturing it, like two lovers wrestling in their sheets. Or holding it prisoner, like a widow hugging her pillow, unable to sleep. But you don't kill time – by dying in bed or tossing a watch out a plane.

I looked at the jumpmaster, staring uneasily out the door – his dark chiseled face like molded clay. He must have sensed my eyes, because his head suddenly turned from the door and resumed watch of our stick.

Our stick was typical: sixteen packed tight in a C-47. Each of us carried more than a hundred pounds of gear, some much more. The guy to my left cradled a .30 machine gun; the fellow to my right had a mortar tube strapped diagonally across his chest, like a prosthetic in case one of his legs was blown off. I was lucky: I only had that sixty-pound bag that would *supposedly* dangle from my hip once the chute deployed. I emphasize *supposedly* ‘cause no one had tested the last-minute idea.

Maybe I should have emphasized *only* because everyone was overloaded, following the age-old tendency of combat soldiers to be ready for every conceivable emergency. Hugging my combat jacket (the pockets packed) was a webbing belt and braces with six grenades and a dozen ammunition clips. Then there was the holstered .45, water canteen, shovel, first aid kit, and bayonet. Over this went the parachute harness, cinched tightly across my shoulders and thighs: the main chute filling my backpack and the reserve chute clipped in front. I’d strapped a gas mask on my left leg, a jump-knife to my right. Then I’d slung a musette bag across my chest (two mines, four TNT sticks and more ammunition). Over this went a Mae West life jacket. And, of course, there was my M1 rifle and steel helmet.

The gear weighed as heavily on my mind as my body. But I wasn’t burdened with the thought that ninety- percent of my gear was there to take life, and only ten-percent to sustain it. Forget the few ounces to save it. (After all, I was there to kill.) The worry was that jumping with all that dead weight was a good way of killing myself. Just thinking about weight made me feel heavy, sluggish, tired. I yawned, yawned a lot on that trip. Somewhere along the way I loosened the chinstrap on my helmet, which turned out to be a mistake, not that it mattered much. There were a lot of mistakes that night.

I looked at my young brothers and saw them as the old men they sat like. I tried to imagine them as if they all made it through the jump, the invasion, the war... and ended up remembering this moment from an iron bench fixed to a shade tree. I tried to see their taut faces streaked with charcoal and dark helmets netted with burlap as drooping pale skin and thin white hair. Their bulky battle gear and rifles as stained clothes hanging loosely over huddled bones, with fragile hands knotted over worn sticks between their knees. I imagined faltering lips moving without words and dim eyes seeing the world as a stillness of amber. By trying to bury time I’d given it wings: it had flown over our lives faster than the plane had flown over the Channel.

After flying straight for most of the trip the formation began to turn inland. As the plane dipped its wing and began its turn, moonlight slid quickly across the floor and up across their grim faces. For a fleeting moment they were bathed in buttery gauze. Then, just as quickly, there was no light at all.

We’d entered a cloudbank. The plane shook violently, catching many off guard. Just as our eyes adjusted to the darkness there was a sudden flash, a guttural burst, and a half-second later a sound like gravel thrown at the plane. The plane lurched forward throwing two troopers violently to the floor. Then came another blast. Then another. Suddenly it sounded like a thousand drummers going mad. White tracers arched

everywhere. An explosion ripped through the air, jolting the plane sideways, lifting a wing and pitching me forward. I felt my watch clunk hard on a trooper's helmet. The roar of an engine rose furiously and then fell abruptly. I braced myself against the tortured struts; then, as we leveled out, I stole a glance at my watch: it was 0110. "Twelve minutes to go," I thought, "We'll never make it!"

The pilot was supposed to slow down before turning on the red jump-light, but once thrust in the jaws of violence he throttled up. They all did. Planes were bouncing and weaving like a herd of terrified horses. Rather suddenly the formation broke up, or I should say fell apart as panicky pilots hit their jump-lights way before they should have, scattering sticks all over the place. Two C-47s collided: remarkably many of the paratroopers streamed out.

We were only about 600 feet up, the 40-mm antiaircraft tracers coming closer and closer. About the time the tracers were popping right past the tail of the plane the red light came on and immediately the jumpmaster screamed: "Stand up, hook up!" We began to move almost before he had spoken. Troopers were screaming, "Come on! Come on! Let's get out of here!" In one swift movement I pushed up, elbowed forward, and felt the satisfying click as I snapped my ripcord to the taut wire overhead. The jumpmaster screamed again: "Equipment check! Sound off!" Another explosion shook the plane, followed by a staccato rippling from the back: "sixteen Ready, fifteen Ready, fourteen Ready..." Before I could yell, "four Ready!" the green light flashed. The jumpmaster issued his final command: "Let's go! Let's go!"

All paratroopers fear the terrifying moment might seize them. But we didn't. The only thing that seized us was the terrifying fear of being in that plane. I wanted to get out like everybody else. We shuffled forward quickly, prodding the fellow in front to move faster, faster. I got to the door, gripped the edge with one hand, tossed my leg bag with the other and stepped into solid air.

We were flying way too fast – about 150 miles an hour. At that speed one doesn't step into thin air; it's thick, almost like water when you hit it. And it came like a boot to the face: knocking my helmet off and sucking the air out of my lungs in one single blow. I seemed to choke on the air, gasping as if I couldn't get enough of it, rather like a diver hitting the surface from below.

I immediately pulled the slipknot to release my leg bag. But with all that weight and speed, the rope snapped like a bullwhip and the bag tore off.

I fell slowly, slower than ever in training. Or at least it felt that way. Maybe because it was night and I was disoriented. Perspective: use it or lose it.

I lost it along with my helmet and leg bag and, oddly enough, my fear. Or at least I can't remember being scared. I was more awed, I guess because it all seemed so surreal, like falling out of bed as a kid. Anyway, I knew the chute would open: it always did.

But it didn't.

I had a reserve chute, of course, though I never thought to use it. I didn't have time. We jump too low. It took around four, maybe five seconds before I hit the ground.

I can hardly remember a thing from that fall, which is odd when I think of it now. I recollect so many thoughts about that uneventful flight to Normandy, but I can't recall a single thought as I fell from the sky. I'm not even sure what I *felt* at the time. What I do remember is an expansive view, a panorama that's impossible to describe and improbably to believe. It was dreadfully beautiful. Tracers lit up the sky with fountains of color. Bursting ack-ack illuminated mushrooms of flak, smudging the night with their delicate tentacles. And moonlit parachutes gliding everywhere. Some chutes unfurling from a string of pearls pulled from a plane, others collapsing gently on the ground, as if fainting.

The last thing I remember seeing was a C-47 caught by three searchlights, like a moth pinned to black velvet. And I died.

I don't remember hitting the ground, nor feeling any pain. I didn't see my life flash by (before impact) or a light at the end of a tunnel (afterwards). If I had I'm sure I'd remember, because the mysteries of death were there. The only thing I knew about death is what everyone knows: it's inevitable. Unlike a parachute, it's the one thing that never lets you down. It's more certain than love and more reliable than friendship.

The jumpmaster found my body. He'd lost his rifle in the jump and was searching for a weapon. He was hunting with an air of being hunted himself: crouching low, moving fast, scuttling rat-like in the tall grass. His quick hands secured my M1 in a few jerky movements. I guess he didn't recognize me at first, what with it being so dark. But when he slipped my musette bag off over my head his quick movements slowed, though never halted. He seemed to move with delicate vacancy yet there was also something quite serious and studious about it.

He was unfastening my watch when someone called the password: "Flash!" He threw an anxious look over his shoulder, then replied in a loud whisper, "Thunder!" He buckled it on his wrist, stole a few glances sideways before moving, and then slipped quickly into the darkness.

Later, much later, long after his dark chiseled face had become pale and soft, he'd sit on an iron bench beneath a heroic tree, typically alone. Often he'd look at Dad's watch; rheumy eyes fixed with vague penetration. He wasn't killing time; he was resurrecting it. Through a trance of detachment he'd drift from his amber world of stillness to another place, another time, another darkness filled with light. One day, when the autumn leaves flamed in russet glory, the jumpmaster looked at the watch in disbelief – it had stopped – and he momentarily buried his face in his hands. It was as if someone had cried, "Watch out!"