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CHAPTER ONE

THE NARROW ALLEY FROM HELL



It is a long, long way from an alley in North Philadelphia to the Normandy beaches on the northern coast of France.

I say “alley” because the little street where G.I. Joe grew up was little more than just a narrow, concrete passageway. If you were to drive south on Margaret Street, away from the elevated commuter train station in the northern section of the city of Philadelphia called Frankford, you would come to a huge iron train trestle, where passenger trains, as well as long and heavy freight trains, cross above the street. To visit the home of G.I. Joe’s childhood, one just stopped and took a hard left before going under the trestle.

G.I.

JOE

&

LILLIE

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The block-long, narrow alleyway was called Trenton Street. After climbing up a steep hill, the alley then straightened out and ran right alongside the railroad tracks for about 100 yards. Then it suddenly took another steep dive down the other side onto Orthodox Avenue.

Trenton Street had only four houses, and they all faced the tracks.

Picture a front door and 20 feet of a narrow front yard made up mostly of weeds and stones. The yard lay beside a potholed street, made of weathered concrete and cracked cobblestones. Only a layer of coal on the other side of the street provided a barrier for the four sets of horizontal railroad tracks. A train of some kind passed by every ten minutes or so, and its passing shook the dishes right off the shelves.

No wonder everybody in the house yelled at each other and alcohol abuse ran rampant. A train going by,



*G.I. Joe's parents
at the house on
Trenton Street*

or perhaps the grand opening of a pack of matches, provided as good of an excuse as any for G.I. Joe's father, Roy Sr., to get hammered.

G.I. Joe grew up during the late thirties and early forties with two older brothers, Roy Jr. and Elwin, and a younger sister, Viola. More often than not, their little house was also shared with Eleanor's mother. Grandma Longstreth's constant hollering and complaining added to the madhouse atmosphere.

The little green house on that narrow alley from hell must have been a lot like living in a crowded hole with a bucket on your head while ten guys beat on it with jackhammers. Sort of like . . . well, a foxhole!

A Mother's Love

During the war years, when much of America pulled together, G.I. Joe's family started to implode on a regular basis. G.I. Joe's dad was a little guy with a big complex who drank in order to escape the fact that he had been dealt a bad hand — although he never tried to change anything. He lost job after job and stayed drunk most of the time. In order to pay the bills, he depended on the money that trickled in from whatever pay his sons earned and the income brought home by Eleanor. She had a job cooking at a school cafeteria.

When Roy got drunk, he beat up on everyone in the house until Roy Jr. and Elwin grew bigger and stronger. Still, he continued to take out his frustrations on the youngest son. He constantly called G.I. Joe names

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G.I.

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and hit him with a belt. Roy's wife was a tough woman, outweighing Roy by about 60 pounds and would sometimes intervene.

G.I. Joe only loved his mother, although she seldom showed him much affection. No one else in the house seemed to matter. That bond remained strong in spite of all the chaos, and helped to keep him on an even keel. She cared just enough to provide an emotional cushion for a young man who wanted and needed to believe in his heart that his mom really loved him.

It was certainly not a Norman Rockwell painting.

Let Him Go!

G.I. Joe dropped out of high school and worked several jobs as an electrician's apprentice. He was handy with tools, a quick learner, and was able to bring some money home to place on the table. It was a way for him to prove to his mother and father that he could indeed do something right, despite the harsh words to the contrary that echoed constantly from Roy Sr., and his loudmouthed grandmother's constant hollering and screeching.

G.I. Joe came home from work one day and told his mother, father, and grandmother, "It's time for me to join the service and fight for my country."

Many guys that he had known from school and work had already answered the call of duty. At five feet and nine inches, and weighing only about 130 pounds, Joe had thin, yet muscular, arms. His legs had become

strong from climbing up and down ladders every day, and he stood about two inches taller than his father.

Instead of pride and congratulations, G.I. Joe's announcement was met with violence. Stunned, the new recruit tried to duck the chair that Roy Sr. swung at his son's face.

It is unclear as to why this happened. Was it a deep feeling of failure and lack of self-worth? Could it have been jealousy, coupled with a fear that the boy might leave and actually accomplish something good in life, while the father never would?

Could the man have that much hatred for life itself, or was this as good a time as any to take out all of his own anger on his son one more time? Or do we just chalk it up to the good mix of Schmidts beer and Four Roses whiskey?

Whatever the case, a drunken Roy Sr. had to be just as shocked when his youngest son grabbed him by both shoulders and sat him right back in his smelly and stained living room chair.

"You'll never amount to anything!" Roy hollered as G.I. Joe turned and headed out of the house for the last time. He threw an empty whiskey bottle that missed the boy by a mile and kept up the tirade long after the door slammed shut.

"Go and join the army! Go on and fight the war. You'll probably get yourself killed on the first day! GO ON!!"

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G.I.

“Oh, just leave him alone, Roy,” said Eleanor, although quite a bit late and without near enough conviction.

JOE

&

“Ahhhhh, let him go,” screeched Grandma.

LILLIE

Going Anywhere

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By 1943, Roy Jr. had already been drafted, and Elwin had joined up. Little sister Viola spent most of her time sitting in the weedy front yard, watching the trains go by and daydreaming about one day riding on one. *A nice seat looking out of a bright, sunlit window, she thought, and going somewhere. Anywhere. . . .*

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G.I. Joe had shared that same daydream many times, and now he found himself aboard just such a train on his way to Maryland for basic training. That very train may have blown right by the old house and shook the dishes right off the shelf.

I like to believe that it did just that!