New Fiction from Steve Bills: “Bombing Pearl Harbor”

29 April 1971

From: Naval Science Department

To: Midshipmen Second Class, Navigation and Piloting 301 (NAV 301)

Subject: Final Navigation Project-Due: 1600 hours, 13 May, Luce Hall, Room 104

Mastering navigation is critical for every Naval Officer. This project covers topics from the last eight months and represents 40% of your grade. Instructions, answer sheets, and charts are provided. The exercise simulates USS Robinson’s

(DDG-12) transit from San Diego to Pearl Harbor as part of a carrier task force. You will serve as Robinson's navigator.

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"Company, ten-hut. Dress right. Attention to morning announcements."

Our midshipman company commander's voice was stern at our 0645 morning meal formation. "From the Battalion Officer: This is the final warning for whoever is bombarding the eighth wing tennis courts with debris. If littering continues, an all-night watch will be manned by eighth wing residents."

Chortles and snickers filled the company ranks.

"It's not my fault; business is business," whispered my roommate, Billy Gleason, beside me in formation.

"Maybe it is your fault," I said. "Did you look? Rubbers are everywhere."

The company commander continued. "Alumni returning from their first duty stations will attend a reception in Memorial Hall at 1700 today. First Lieutenant James Creeson, USMC, class of 69 from our company is scheduled to attend if anyone wants to say hello."

"We should go see him, hear his Vietnam stories," I whispered.

After classes we changed from working uniforms to whites and rushed to the reception, anxious to see what had become of Jimmy Creeson. He was alone on the balcony, smoking Camels, flicking ashes into a plastic cup. He was five-six, muscular, a former collegiate wrestler. His skin had a yellow tinge, his hands quivered, the flame dancing when he lit his cigarette. The Marine Corps logo was engraved on his class ring stone. As our first midshipman squad leader when we were plebes, he'd been disciplined but upbeat, always smiling. We respected his demanding nature because the tasks he gave us seemed to have a

purpose. We saluted him, excited to see him, but he didn't return it, nor did he smile. He discreetly took a flask from inside his left sock and poured vodka into his Kool-Aid. He offered us some and Billy, at the risk of expulsion, accepted. We had listened intensely to periodic announcements of the Academy's Vietnam casualties, including Creeson's classmates, relieved that his name was not among them. He looked exhausted, his eyelids drooped, but he had survived. His uniform was immaculate, with three rows of new ribbons, including the Silver Star.

"How's football?" he asked Billy.

"I didn't make the team," Billy said, slouching. "Lost my touch."

"Football isn't everything. It just seems like everything. It's a diversion from all the BS," Creeson said, his voice without inflection.

"How's the Marine Corps? What's Vietnam like?" I asked.

Creeson looked puzzled, perhaps offended, glancing about without eye contact. He took a long drag and gulped his drink. "I shouldn't have come here. You guys, be careful. Really," he said. He walked away, not checking out with the officer managing the reception. With perfect posture and bold cadence, he walked, heels clicking, down the Bancroft Hall stairway into Tecumseh Court.

I felt terrible about asking my questions. We talked with feigned interest to a few of the naval officers at the reception who had completed sea tours. Some had participated in naval gunfire support off Vietnam's coast; others had cruised the Mediterranean, gladly assigned to ships far from war. None of them, except James Creeson, seemed damaged.

"Creeson looked terrible. He didn't look like the same person. My uncle's skin is like that when he needs dialysis," said

Billy.

“The Marine Corps is out of the question for me. I’m going to drive ships,” I declared. Billy, perhaps a little tipsy, was falling behind as we walked, maybe frightened by what he’d seen. “What about you, Billy? Ships? Planes? Submarines?”

“I haven’t thought much about it. We don’t have to decide until January. I guess the National Football League is off the table.”

We were not exactly model midshipmen but did the best our consciences allowed. Billy, from New Mexico, and I, from Nevada, roomed together during junior year. We were brothers in western solidarity, sons of landlocked mountain desert states that were isolated from the Navy. We stayed mostly under the radar, not shining, not failing, getting by. Billy’s business acumen made him famous in an underground way. By junior year, our classmates seemed to forget that he was a football recruit.

Billy’s right glutes, hamstrings, and calves were marvels. His right leg juxtaposed with his left appeared to be twice as big. He held his state’s high school records for the longest field goal and consecutive PATs, leading to his induction into New Mexico’s High School Football Hall of Fame. He was 5’10” and weighed 165—perfect for a kicker. His 800 math SAT and 20-20 vision, coupled with kicking skills, made him a perfect Navy recruit. He told me he’d dreamed of being interviewed on CBS following his winning kick in the Army-Navy game.

After a successful year on the freshman football team, Billy was cut from the varsity because he developed a chronic hook. His range exceeded fifty yards, but he couldn’t shake the portside hex. The team hired an ex-NFL kicker to assist—no luck. His father engaged a sports psychologist who calmed Billy’s sweating nightmares but didn’t correct kicking problems. The Academy medical staff warned his father that too

much psychological treatment could hinder Billy's ability to obtain a security clearance when the time came. Treatment ceased.

Ashore in Italy during a summer training cruise, a fortune teller told him he would live until he was ninety, but kicking was, "I am sorry, che sfortuna." He tried confession in Saint Peters, seeking higher authority than the Academy Chapel confessional adjacent to the crypt of John Paul Jones. Religious entreaties failed. For two years, on his way to class, Billy threw pennies at Tecumseh's statue overlooking the Yard. Tecumseh, a Shawnee warrior, brought luck to penny throwers.

"That won't work," Bobby Williams scoffed, throwing a penny on his way to an exam. "It only works for tests—not kicking."

Billy suffered anxiety and boredom with the curriculum that he might have liked if playing football were included in his life. He suffered as an anonymous spectator among the rest of us. I marched next to him many times on our way through Annapolis to Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium for home games. Standing on the field within his kicking range of the south goalposts, waiting for the Brigade to complete the "march on," he softly read aloud names of famous battles decorating stadium bulwarks—Leyte Gulf, Midway, Iwo Jima, Pearl Harbor.

"This is chip shot range for you," I commented, attempting to change his mood.

"No kidding," he whimpered.

In the first game of junior year with ten seconds to play, Navy's kicker missed a thirty-five-yard field goal. We lost by one. A ray of hope emerged when Billy was invited to varsity practice on Monday—he was uninvited on Tuesday.

Billy searched for distractions. He wasn't interested in

Weapons Systems or Seamanship classes, earning lackluster C's. He effortlessly earned A's in calculus, physics, and physical education. He read passages aloud to me from his father's letters, mocking his father's chagrin. When the grades didn't improve, sterner letters arrived.

"Can't you try harder? You're embarrassing us. How hard can 'Introduction to Shipboard Weapons' be? What's going to happen when the weapons are real?"

Instead of studying more, he conjured a plan to become the entrepreneur of Bancroft Hall. He was our black-market Yossarian, a money-making machine, using his version of Wall Street analytical shrewdness.

"I can see the market," he exclaimed in October before midterms. "Everybody wants comfort food that reminds them of home."

"What?" I asked, looking up from homework.

"I can relieve homesickness. I'm going to sell grilled cheese sandwiches at night during finals week. We're going to make a fortune. The sandwiches probably don't even have to be good."

He piloted his business plan during midterms. The Brigade had extended study time beyond normal taps during test weeks and midshipmen were hungry late at night. Billy borrowed money from our banker classmate, Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson and he recruited Bobby Williams and me as cooks. We practiced grilling in a Teflon-coated electric frying pan—a violation of every fire code and hygiene regulation in our universe. Billy hid the pan in his basement storage locker and retrieved it at night when we should have been studying. Instead, our spartan team wrapped steaming sandwiches in foil, stuffed them in paper bags with chips, and sold them door-to-door for two dollars each, quickly selling all we had.

When first semester finals week came, applying lessons from

the pilot, Billy upgraded production capacity with six electric griddles and more workers. The buttery aroma of sandwiches filled the hall. We posted guards to ensure that our kitchens remained hidden. Our company's seniors liked the grilled cheese so much that they turned a blind eye toward our enterprise and its brazen violations. We sold over 1000 sandwiches for four dollars a bag, five nights in a row. Miraculously we passed our exams, exhausted, cash happy. Billy repaid Stonewall with interest.

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Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, from South Carolina, was the son and grandson of Academy graduates; his father was an oil company president and a member of Augusta National Golf Club. Stonewall received unsolicited monthly deposits, "from Motha," to his bank account and became a lender to classmates in need. After his successful investment in Billy's business, the two briefly seemed like close friends. They played golf and Billy helped him with calculus. In April their friendship crumbled.

"You have Masters tickets?" Billy inquired, a month before Spring Break when the golf tournament was scheduled.

"Of course," Stonewall replied. "Do you want to come? Mason's coming. You should come too."

"I can buy the tickets from you," said Billy.

"Are you kidding? You're a guest," explained Stonewall.

Mason, from Raleigh, was Stonewall's roommate and teammate on Navy's golf team. Mason would do almost anything to escape Annapolis and return to Raleigh for weekends. He bragged obnoxiously about his harem there.

Two days before Spring Break, Stonewall cancelled Billy's invitation explaining that his family "wasn't going to the tournament because MeeMa was ill." Billy had watched the

Masters with his father on TV for years. He was heartbroken not to see it in person but gracious with the bad news. “Hope your grandmother gets well soon,” he said. We heard that Mason was still going on the trip, so Billy suspected that his own Yankee roots and lack of Navy “blue blood” had caused the family to veto the visit.

Instead of the Masters for Spring Break, Bobby Williams, Billy, and I took the train to New York, stayed in a Times Square hotel, drank beer, and watched the New York Knicks using free USO tickets. On Saturday in between tourist excursions, we watched the Masters on TV.

“Hey, that’s Mason,” yelled Bobby. “He’s wearing a Navy golf hat.”

Billy angrily glared at the screen, his blackball suspicions confirmed.

When we returned from break, Mason told us all about the Masters. Stonewall’s grandmother had miraculously, “praise the lord,” recovered. Mason bragged about the “ladies of Augusta” with whom he’d “had relaaations.” We didn’t believe him until we spotted the antibiotic on his desk a week later.

Billy became analytical about Mason’s illness and devised a new enterprise to exploit the ways of midshipmen tomcats. He ordered a case of condoms that arrived in an enormous box with no return address. “If I’m right, we have a bull market—more profitable than sandwiches,” he predicted. Advertising required delicacy—but he was convinced that confidential sales would be appealing. Mason and Stonewall were his first customers.

“Twenty dollars a box? Steep,” complained Mason.

“Not for quality,” explained Billy. “You don’t have to leave Bancroft Hall. I know you don’t want to be caught with your pants down again,” warned Billy, winking.

They bought two packages each and I thought Billy was going to be sick with excitement when he considered the profit potential.

Gradually, however, Billy realized what liars comprised the bragging Brigade. He made a few sales to guys like Mason, but no significant market emerged. Even when Billy lowered the price multiple times, nobody wanted rubbers. Occasionally someone would “buy one for my wallet, just in case, you know, better safe than sorry.” Billy sulked. “I should have run a pilot,” he lamented.

Reengineering Billy’s condom business was inspired by my chemistry professor, a Navy Commander whose whites were decorated with Vietnam War medals and a command-at-sea button. He seemed bored, unengaged with class, dreaming of the bridge of his destroyer. During class, he filled a latex glove with water and casually lobbed it to the lab’s deck where it exploded.

“The purpose of the Navy, gentlemen, is to deliver ordnance,” he proclaimed, suddenly inspired to provide us with important truths beyond the chemistry curriculum.

His explanation of the Navy baffled me. No one challenged his manifesto or even commented on the mess he created. My trouser legs were soaked, making me wonder how much water would fit in one of those high-quality condoms. Around three gallons, we discovered.

“The problem is lifting that little boy,” proclaimed Billy. He lowered his prices and began an aggressive advertising campaign, showing others a condom’s superb ordnance potential. They were nothing like conventional water balloons. Rubber wars erupted. Bombs were launched and booby traps set throughout Bancroft Hall. Vicious warriors, creative future ordnance deliverers, added Kool-Aid to their payloads—red water bombs were death sentences for Navy whites. For several

weeks floods and condom remnants were everywhere.

Billy became a cautious arms supplier, warning overly aggressive warriors of risks. “Dropping three gallons from six flights up could injure somebody,” Billy counseled.

“We’re not going to hit anybody, just get them wet. This is America; shut the fuck up!”

Water wars waged by future Navy and Marine Corps officers escalated. Just opening a door could be disastrous and bomb squad pre-clearance became a requisite. Booby traps were planted in the most unexpected places. Halls were awash in a rainbow of colors, slippery, treacherous.

After a month, the antics died, skirmishes completed, scores settled; mutually assured destruction necessitated a cease-fire after so many uniforms had to be replaced. Business subsided and remaining condoms were sharply discounted, deployed mostly to nightly test bombings from rooms above the tennis courts at the base of Bancroft Hall. Spring-fevered weaponeers sick of studying jettisoned enormous bombs that barely fit through the windows. Noisy splashing geysers were so commonplace that we no longer watched them. Custodians grew tired of policing the mess and complained to the Battalion Officer.

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Billy and Stonewall had jointly organized and financed a weekend party for eight of us earlier in the year. The party was scheduled for May, a month before our Ring Dance and the semester’s end. They had each paid half the deposit for a big house on Chesapeake Bay, ten miles from Annapolis. Because of continued tensions between them as the date approached, Billy requested a refund from the owner, a 1948 Academy graduate, who resolutely refused and reminded him that final payment was due. Seven of us wrote rental checks to Billy who consolidated payment. We cautiously proceeded with party plans, despite the

lingering animus.

Along with our dates, or drags, in Academy vernacular, we arrived at the majestic, weathered house, greeted by warm southern breezes, azaleas exploding with color, Marvin Gaye blasting over speakers, and picturesque views of the shipping lane to Baltimore. The place was calming, filled with the owner's Academy mementos including a signed poster of Roger Staubach. The intended calming effect of the party settled over us, temporarily easing the pressures of upcoming finals and the problematic Navigation Project. Our location, outside the seven-mile limit, a radius from the Academy's chapel dome, allowed us to drink beer and other "laaabations," Stonewall's phrase, without violating Academy rules invoking severe penalties.

Billy prepared detailed plans for the weekend in the same manner he ran his businesses-an inclement weather plan, a transportation plan, menus, assignments for cooking, clean-up, sports equipment, security, safety. We mostly ignored his fastidiousness but were immediately thrilled to see the results of his food planning: blue crabs in bushel baskets and a keg of Michelob greeted us on the screened porch.

"How do you do this again?" asked Alison, Mason's girlfriend.

With his mouth full of crab, Mason explained and demonstrated crab dissection. Alison, a student at Georgia Tech, was the reigning Peach Bowl Princess.

"See, there's nothing to it. The biggest legs, that's where it's best."

"Mason, I've ruined my nails. Can you hit this crab with the little mallet for me? The last one splattered crab guts. Smell your hands, Mason. How are you gonna get that off? If you think you're gonna touch me with those hands, you're dreamin, Darlin."

We fifteen, minus Alison, pounded away at crabs, swilled beer, and occasionally took breaks to eat salad and cornbread and dance to the music. A salty breeze rustled our newspaper tablecloths as the sun disappeared. With his planning, Billy sought harmony, mostly for the sake of recovering his damage deposit. Nevertheless, his planning had gaps. In this case, his oversight was sleeping arrangements.

We had four bedrooms, eight couples, and no plan. Some would be stuck sleeping on couches or on the floor. The relationships, including mine, having just met my girlfriend in March, were in various stages. Most seemed relieved with sleeping arrangements that posed no pressures.

Mason, on the other hand, desperately wanted a bedroom. In the hastily executed straw drawing for bedrooms, Alison and Mason were stuck on the living room floor. Mason continued his entreaties.

“Please, Bobby, you don’t want a bedroom. You hardly know that girl and she’s only seventeen.”

“Fuck you, Mason,” Bobby’s date snarled, taking Bobby’s hand, leading him through the bedroom door, sticking out her tongue at Mason.

Mason waved his checkbook, offering to buy a bedroom. He whined and threatened to leave, but classmates who’d drawn bedrooms ignored him.

Alison had been steadily sipping Manhattans after declaring that she couldn’t deal with crabs. Her speech was slurred as she coddled Mason’s arm and kissed his neck. With no bedroom, she made a cocoon-like bed on the floor with two air mattresses, quilts, and blankets she’d found in a closet. She changed into her Georgia Tech T-shirt and silk gold shorts with a yellow-jacket insignia.

“Goodnight classmates and thanks so much for giving us a

bedroom after I found this place and made the arrangements," Mason spouted, emerging from the bathroom with toothpaste on his lips.

"Mason, you didn't find this place, Billy did. And your contribution to the rent is pitiful. We should make you sleep on the beach," I said.

"There's room on that boat by the dock. You could move this little bed under the stars and practice celestial navigation," Stonewall suggested.

Mason and Miss Peach Bowl looked comfortable, framed by the pinewood floor, perched between the wall with Staubach's poster and a table filled with the owner's collectibles. Twelve of us, now in sweatshirts, paraded past them. We took our drinks to the beach, revived the fire with driftwood, and breathed in cooling breezes. It was not yet midnight—why sleep with so much beer left? The lights shining from Bobby's room ruined the starlight. We saw him through the window playing Yahtzee with his girlfriend. We banged on the panes, beckoning them to douse the lights and join us. The fire, the Old Bay aroma, beer, and female company created a lazy coziness.

"How far did you guys get on the Navigation Project?" Bobby asked.

"I'm past the fog in San Diego Harbor," Stonewall said.

"Relax, enjoy this last weekend," implored Billy. "We have until Thursday. It won't be that hard once the enemy submarine gets out of sonar range and the ship doesn't have to zig-zag. I think it's a straight track from there to Pearl Harbor. If there's some trick, we'll find it."

Under the stars the only sounds were the fire and the squeak of rubber fenders on the motorboat rubbing against the pier. No one seemed sleepy. Suddenly, the embarrassing sound of Miss Peach Bowl's groaning, muffled screaming, and pounding fists

against the pinewood emerged from the house, providing evidence that Mason was indeed the biggest stud since War Admiral. The ending to our jealous, disdainful listening came with the crash of glass shattering—a lamp or vase had been knocked to the floor. We assumed the amorous noises would cease, but they continued. I knew Billy was cringing at the thought of paying damages, but he remained calm, sipping beer, adding firewood. “Mason is such an idiot,” he complained.

On Monday Billy’s bank called informing him that Mason’s rent check had insufficient funds. The landlord also called wanting to know “What the hell happened to my wife’s crystal vase? I am taking the replacement cost out of the deposit.”

Mason immediately promised to pay his rent money the following week but grew hysterical when he heard about the additional cost of the broken vase.

“If you assholes hadn’t made me sleep on the floor it wouldn’t have happened. How did we know that vase was on the table? I can’t pay for it for a while.”

“What about you, Stonewall? You want to help your roomie out here?” Billy asked. “Should we convene a meeting to see what our classmates think about this?”

“It’s not necessary. When the owner tells you how much, let me know,” Stonewall said.

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We were deluged with end-of-semester work. The Navigation Project took hours, but Billy was uncharacteristically inspired to finish. Thirteen charts and ten pages of problems covered the spectrum of navigation and piloting we’d studied—deriving fixes, ship positions, using Loran, radar, magnetic and gyro compass readings, celestial navigation with stars, sun, and moon. My charts seemed messy, bleared, smeared with erasures, and sweat. In all, I thought the Naval Science

faculty had created interesting problems. I finished on Wednesday evening and packaged my project as prescribed. Smiling, Billy returned from Luce Hall, waving his receipt after submitting his project early.

“You’re finished, right? We can talk about it without worrying about an honor violation?” Billy asked.

“My charts are ready. I’m not opening them again,” I declared.

“Did you find the math error in the Antares star line calculation? If you correct the math, the stars cross in a point, a perfect fix,” he explained.

Billy’s math error discovery was ingenious. I’d never considered the possibility that math errors would be purposefully inserted in the problem. He stood beside our window, rubbing the strings of a football.

“Having the task force arrive on a Sunday morning in December was a clever touch. You noticed that didn’t you?” I asked. Distracted, he didn’t hear me.

“Look at those idiots.” He was peering down at Stonewall and Mason’s room, kitty-corner to ours on the deck below. Bobby’s room was next to theirs. Football fields and the Chesapeake Bay formed a scenic panorama to the south. Rooms were not air conditioned so in spring everyone kept the windows open. A cacophony of music blared from the open windows.

“What idiots?” I asked, examining the court lit with lights from dozens of rooms where midshipmen were studying.

“Mason and Stonewall. Look at them down there. You know damn well they’re working on the project together. We should turn them in.”

We turned off our lights and clandestinely watched them, reviving our anger at Mason, confirming our distrust of Stonewall who was peering out the window, yawning, checking

his Rolex Submariner. Mason was marking fixes and drawing tracks on the large-scale chart of Pearl Harbor where the transit ended a short distance from USS Arizona's memorial.

"It wouldn't be that hard to hit them from here, do you think?" Billy asked.

"With what? Noooo," I said. "No."

"Let me ask you something. If you'd broken the vase instead of Mason, do you think Stonewall would have offered to pay for it?"

"Of course not," I said.

"We're just not in the same Navy as they are. Don't you think an attack is justified? My balloons?"

"It wouldn't be that hard, but it's a bad idea."

"One try. If we miss, they'll just think it was another tennis court water bomb. We'll be Yamamoto—surprise attack."

"I have some line and canvas we can use—we can't just throw it. Aim and stealth are the problems."

Billy smiled. "Where's the hose? I've got red Kool-Aid that will be perfect."

"Don't fill it too much," I warned. "The plebes always add too much water and end up exploding it on themselves."

With the big red balloon, like a rising sun in the middle of our deck, we plotted our attack. We meticulously practiced with a shoe tied to the end of the line hung from a window in a room across the hall from us, out of sight from our target. As we prepared in the twilight some of the plebes noticed us slide the rope out the window. We decided to risk one more test and swing the shoe toward the target to validate trajectory and line length. I could see a sweaty sheen on

Billy's face. Mason continued charting, head down, and Stonewall was adjusting his stereo, raising the volume of "Give Peace a Chance." Despite their egos, they would surely see us. They glimpsed our way but somehow didn't notice the line. After several perfect practice swings with the shoe, we marked the line length with chalk and pulled the rope inside. When we raised the giant red condom to our window ledge and fitted the canvas straps around it, we could hear the plebes above the music gasping and applauding. Billy shook his fist at them, demanding silence.

The ball was heavy but manageable. We lowered it slowly to the marked line length and began swaying from side to side across the sill. The red ball moved smoothly, gaining momentum, bulging where the latex was weak, inching toward the target. It grazed the bulkhead below us, and we cringed at the thought of a rupture.

"Okay, here we go," Billy whispered. "One more big swing."

I guess we didn't account for the size of the ball compared to the shoe, or the added length of the cradle, or the line's stretch from the weight. The enormous red orb swung directly through Bobby's window and exploded over his Navigation Project, turning his world ubiquitously red. Bobby screamed, overwhelmed by the explosion, a casualty of friendly fire. The plebes were flashing lights, jumping up and down, shocked, awed.

We threw the rope to the middle of the tennis courts below. Billy sat down, pretending to read, listening to Bobby's profanity echoing across the court; I held a pillow to my face, fighting an explosion of laughter. Of course, we'd missed our target, like Billy's kicks, to the left.

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Second Class Ring Dance traditions prescribe that class rings be strung on ribbons and worn as pendants around our dates'

necks until each couple ceremoniously dips them into a binnacle containing waters from the seven seas. We completed the ritual and donned our rings. After three years of anticipation, the ceremony seemed anticlimactic. We'd been counting the days, and now, entitled to wear rings like Jimmy Creeson's, they embodied alarming burdens we'd face in one year when we were commissioned.

Billy and I returned to our room after the dance just before curfew. Billy was jumpy, energized, twisting his ring, singing songs from the dance. Two Navy ships were anchored in the Bay, ablaze with strings of celebratory lights. The athletic field to the south was abandoned, its goalposts lit by streetlamps and a waxing moon.

"Come on," Billy insisted, pulling his bag of footballs from the closet.

"What?"

"Come on!"

We trudged down the back stairs in Navy tuxedos with yellow cummerbunds, pleated shirts, gold buttons, and dance-scuffed shoes. The damp grass soaked the knees of my trousers as I held the ball for Billy Gleason on the forty-yard line.

"Look," he exclaimed. "Antares is right between the goalposts. This is for Jimmy Creeson."

His kick soared triumphantly through the uprights.