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"What Goes Around" by White Queen

"Never again," Billy Nelson muttered. He waited beside the main street in yet another sleepy Normandy hamlet. An American convoy chugged past, churning up enough dust to choke a camel. Billy coughed and clamped a hand over his mouth and nose. His eyes watered, and he waved his other hand in front of his face. It didn't help.

The convoy was so loud, Billy didn't even notice a Jeep pull up beside him until a voice hollered in his ear, "Where you headed, Nelson?"

Billy whirled and found Cpl. Cassotto leaning out of his seat, his face inches from Billy's.

The mail clerk's usual grin stretched between his round cheeks. With his helmet tilted back and a thin cigar between his teeth, he looked as carefree as Billy was worried.

Billy pulled the hand away from his mouth and nose long enough to shout back, "Supply!"

"Hop in!" Cassotto bellowed.

Billy climbed in, not at all sure what the corporal had planned, but grateful for any help that was cheerfully offered. The convoy could be miles long for all he knew, and he needed to get across that road and back ASAP.

Cassotto honked his horn wildly, adding to the mind-numbing din. He let the Jeep roll toward the passing trucks.

"Are you crazy?" Billy'd figured they'd drive around the rear of the convoy, not straight through it.

"The mail must go through!" Cassotto yelled. He continued leaning on the horn and edged closer and closer to the huge trucks.

Just when Billy had decided to jump out and run far away from Cassotto, who had obviously gone mad, a convoy truck slowed, then stopped dead. The driver motioned them through. Truck after truck behind him slammed on their brakes.

Cassotto waved his cigar to the truck driver. "I owe you one!" he shouted as they pulled across the street.

"You do!" the driver answered before driving on again.

The corporal drove on down the side street, and by the time they reached the Supply tents, the convoy was a distant rumble. He stopped the Jeep and said, "Can't ask for better service than that." He pointed to the crooked "Supply" sign over the olive drab tent's entrance.

Billy climbed out, a little shaky from what he'd thought for a moment might be his last Jeep ride. "Guess not. Thanks, Cassotto."

"Any time, kid." Cassotto killed the engine and hopped out. "I was headed this way anyway." He grabbed a mail sack out of the Jeep's back and walked away toward another row of tents. "Mail call!" he hollered, his Bronx accent a familiar, welcome fixture in King Company.

Billy ducked into the Supply tent. The grizzled sergeant behind the makeshift counter eyed him like he was a kid hoping to shoplift some chewing gum. "Whaddayawant?" he snarled.

Billy wondered if they sought out irritable guys and stuck them in Supply, or if filling out all that paperwork made them cranky after a while. "I need a canteen," Billy said in his most authoritative voice. He pulled the requisition forms out and put them on the counter.

"You get those signed?" The sergeant squinted at the papers but didn't touch them.

"By Lieutenant Hanley." Billy flushed at the insinuation that he'd be dumb enough to bring an unsigned requisition paper within Supply's hallowed fabric walls.

"Canteen, huh. Where's yours?"

"I lost it." It was basically the truth, but Billy felt the flush spread to his ears.

The sergeant glared at him. "We're out of canteens."

"What?" As soon as he'd said it, Billy regretted the word. It had slipped out before he could stop it. Supply sergeants like this guy didn't appreciate being questioned.

"Try back in a couple days."

"But... but I..." Billy spluttered.

The sergeant turned his back and disappeared into the mysterious depths of the tent.

Billy snatched his carefully filled out and signed requisition papers – in triplicate! – and scurried out before the sergeant could return and maybe throw something at him.

Cpl. Cassotto was waiting for him. "Get what you needed?" he asked.

"No. They don't have any." Billy wanted to crumple up the sheets and throw them on the ground in disgust. Instead he folded them again and replaced them in his jacket pocket.

"Whatcha need, anyway?"

"A canteen."

"Yeah? How come?"

Billy glanced around to make sure the Supply sergeant wasn't lurking within earshot, ready to catch him in a fib. "Lost mine playing poker," he confided.

"No kidding?" Cassotto laughed. "Musta been some game."

Billy nodded miserably. "With a bunch of guys from Able Company on the ride back up here from the hospital. I'll never make that mistake again." From here on out, he would never play poker with anyone outside his own platoon. He'd lost all his money, his pocketknife, his razor, his watch, and finally his canteen. If they hadn't hit town when they did, he might not still have his boots. Good thing they hadn't played here in camp, or he'd probably have also lost everything in the latest package from his mom and little brother.

"Well, could be worse. You can live without a canteen for a day or two. Just borrow a buddy's cup at chow time."

Billy shook his head. "I'm heading for the front at fourteen-hundred hours. If I show up without a canteen...."

"That sarge of yours gives quite a tongue-lashing."

"Yeah." Not to mention, Littlejohn would never let him hear the end of it. The guy had a memory longer than the convoy still rumbling through town. He still hadn't let Billy forget about that little incident with the lost grenade pin.

Cassotto said, "Hey, maybe I can help you out."

"Really?" Billy said without much hope.

"I got a cousin in Fox Company. They're bivouacked on the other side of town. If anyone can find you a canteen, it'd be him."

"What's his name?" Billy didn't relish crossing that main road again, but neither did he want to hit the front lines canteenless.

"JJ Corby. He's in first platoon. Ask anyone when you get there, they all know him."

Billy glanced at his wrist, then remembered he'd also lost his watch. "What time is it?"

"Twelve-ten."

Almost two hours to cross the road, find Corby, then catch his ride to the front. No problem. "Thanks!"

"Tell him I sent you – he owes me a favor."

"So do I!" Billy waved as Cassotto's Jeep roared off. He didn't even mind the dust cloud the corporal churned up.

Twenty minutes later, Billy found the tents that housed Fox Company. Cassotto had said he could ask anybody. Billy stopped the first soldier he met and asked, "You know a guy named Corby?"

"Sure, everyone knows Corby."

"Know where I can find him?"

"He's in second squad – third row, down at the end."

"Thanks." Billy hurried off in the direction the soldier had pointed. When he got to the end of the row, he rapped on a tent pole, nervous suddenly about asking a favor of a perfect stranger.

A slight, baby-faced soldier lifted the tent flap. "Yes?"

"Corby?"

"Not here. Can I help?"

"Know where I might find him?"

"Nope. He's been gone all morning. Sorry."

"Thanks anyway." So much for Cassotto's cousin. Just great.

A muffled voice somewhere behind the tent said, "What do you want with Corby?"

Billy rounded the tent and saw a long pair of skinny legs sticking out from under a Jeep. "I need a canteen," he said.

"Try Supply," the man under the Jeep suggested.

"I did."

"I see. Can you hand me that wrench?"

Billy spotted a toolbox near the Jeep's front wheel. He squatted by it, found a wrench, and placed it in the hand held out from under the vehicle.

"Thanks." Hand and wrench disappeared under the Jeep. "I saw Corby about an hour ago. Playing craps in the Motor Pool."

"Yeah? Great!" Billy stood up. "Thanks."

Rowdy laughter and cheering filled the Motor Pool. Half a dozen soldiers knelt in a ring, with many more perched on the Jeeps and trucks nearby. A couple of them were the same guys Billy'd played poker with that morning.

Billy tapped the nearest man on the shoulder. "Which one's Corby?" He pointed to the crap shooters.

"Corby? You just missed him. Lit out not ten minutes ago."

"Know where he was going?"

The soldier shrugged. "He cleaned a couple guys out, said something about paying off some debts."

Billy's hopes sagged again.

The guy on Billy's other side said, "I think he was heading for Supply."

"Yeah?"

"I think so."

"Thanks!"

When Billy reached the town's main road, he was relieved to find the convoy had finally finished disturbing the inhabitants' peace. The air was almost breathable again too. When he neared Supply, he saw a familiar figure exit the very tent where he'd made his unsuccessful requisition attempt. "Hey, Cassotto!" he called, ready to tell the mail clerk his cousin was more bother to track down than a canteen was worth.

The soldier turned. "Sorry, no Cassottos here." He waited until Billy reached him, then grinned and said, "I'm his cousin. Corby's the name."

Billy couldn't help saying, "Wow. You sure you're only cousins?" The resemblance was uncanny – Corby and Cassotto could have passed for twins. Same height, same slight build, same round cheeks and pugnacious nose. His voice even sounded like Cassotto's, light and cheerful, with that accent that always reminded Billy a bit of Sgt. Saunders'.

"Sure I'm sure. Whatcha need, kid?" Corby slung an arm around Billy's shoulders.

"A canteen. Cassotto said you might help me out. As a favor to him."

Corby raised his eyebrows. "A canteen, huh."

"Yeah. I tried to requisition one, but they don't have any. I've gotta head up to the front lines in half an hour."

"Twenty bucks."

"For a canteen?" Billy cried. "Cassotto said you owed him one."

"I do. Him. Not you."

"Well, it doesn't matter. I'm broke."

"Hmm." Corby pursed his lips. "Wait, you tried to requisition one from Supply? Still got the form?"

"Yeah."

"Signed?"

"Yeah."

"That'll do for starters." Corby's grin returned. "What else you got?"

Billy thought for a bit. He still had his mess kit, but he needed that too. Same went for his rifle, ammo, helmet.... At last, he said, "Does it have to be something I have on me, or would you trade for stuff I've got stashed with my gear?"



"Well, that all depends on what you got."

Billy paused. He started to glance at his wrist out of habit, then remembered. "What time is it?"

Corby raised his eyebrows. "Something wrong with your watch?"

"I don't have one."

Corby shoved his left sleeve back. He had four watches strapped to his arm. "Thirteen twenty-two."

Billy sighed. "Never mind. I don't have time." He needed to leave now if he was going to catch his ride.

"Wait, at least tell me what you've got stashed." Corby licked his lower lip. "If it's good, you can owe me until you get back."

"A brand-new pack of writing paper?" Billy's mom had sent him a fresh supply, no doubt so he'd have no excuse not to write.

"You're wasting my time."

"I've got three Zane Grey westerns."

"Kid, everybody's got those books. Gimme something I can use. Something I can trade somewhere else."

"What about comic books?" Billy said reluctantly. He'd gotten five new ones in the latest package from home – his little brother always kept Billy well supplied. He hadn't had a chance to read them yet – he'd put them with his gear and they hadn't reached the front before he'd gotten wounded.

Corby's eyes lit up. "Yeah? Like what?"

Billy put on the best poker face Littlejohn had taught him. "Two Superman books."

"And?"

"And two with Batman."

Corby nodded. "That all?" He sounded disappointed.

"Isn't that enough? Four comic books and my requisition forms for one canteen?" Billy did not want to lose the fifth book – it was the Shadow, his favorite.

"Nice meeting you, kid." Corby turned away.

"Okay, okay! And one Shadow."

Corby swung around again. "You just got yourself a canteen." He pulled his own canteen from his belt and held it out.

"Yours?"

Corby rolled his eyes. "All right, seeing as it's gently used, I'll throw in a watch. Satisfied now?"

"Okay." Billy pulled the papers from his pocket and handed them over. He took the canteen and shoved it into the pouch on his belt.

Corby unstrapped one of the watches on his arm and held it out. "That make us even?"

Billy took the watch. "Um, sure. How'll you get the comic books if I'm at the front?"

A dark-haired sergeant rounded the corner of the Supply tent. "Corby!" he barked. "Where've you been? You're supposed to be on sentry duty."

"Oh, hi there, Sarge!" Corby shooed Billy away. "Don't worry, kid, give them to my cousin. He'll see I get them." He walked toward the sergeant, saying, "About that... I traded with Kolinsky 'cause he owed me one."

According to Billy's new watch, which looked suspiciously like the one he'd lost in the poker game, he now had ten minutes to find his ride. He sure regretted losing those comic books. He couldn't even ask his brother for replacements – if their mom found out he was playing poker, heaven only knew what would happen. Then again, maybe when he got back from the front, Corby'd still be around and Billy could get the comic books back from him. Or from whoever had acquired them by then.

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