

New Fiction from Jennifer Orth-Veillon: Marche-en-Famenne

The following is an excerpt from Jennifer Orth-Veillon's work-in-progress, The Storage Room. Here, she intersperses real letters from her grandfather (italicized), an American soldier who fought at the Battle of the Bulge, with her own imagined accounts of the stories behind the letters.

The Battle of the Bulge, which ended 74 years ago on January 25, 1945, was the largest and deadliest battle fought by Americans in WWII and the second-deadliest battle in American history.

All photos provided by the author. – WBT Editors



Three American soldiers in Europe, WWII, taken by the

author's grandfather. Photo
courtesy of Jennifer Orth-
Veillon.

January 12, 1945
Somewhere in Belgium

My Darling,

You are probably sore at me as you read this. I'm sorry. I write as often as I can, and even then, Uncle Sam doesn't handle the mail service over here like he does at home. I admit I laughed at the way you gave me hell in one of your letters. In fact, I read the letter to the boys.

To bring you up to date: we are fighting with the 7th Corps in the north who are using the pincer maneuver. "Pincer" is just like it sounds—a military tactic that actually "pinches," meaning we flank the enemy on both sides and press in. We pinch them. It works beautifully. We are planning to trap some Jerries in the drive.

I hate missing holidays with you. Did I ever tell you about our Thanksgiving Day in Geronweiler, Germany? It was Roosevelt's best T-day yet. Jerry had an artillery observer in the town, and we hit him hard. Still, we took a pounding for the several days we were there. We were stationed in a central building that the Jerries bombed so regularly we timed our trips to the john according to their schedule.

Often, I daydream about you. Sometimes it's so real that I can almost feel you in my arms. Dreaming of you is one of two things I do other than work. The other is dreaming about good food. Incidentally, the Christmas cookies and peanuts arrived in good shape.

The November wave of muddy battles around the Siegfried Line

that carried Brillhart and the Railsplitters, the 84th Infantry, east in December 1944 turned to ice at the Belgian border. They had to blink to keep their eyeballs from freezing, but the cold muted the smell of rotting. A few Christmas lights hung in some little town squares, softening the browns and greys tracks from tanks that stained the new-fallen snow. Frozen mud and dirty snow, brown and brown-grey stains dominated the colors of the Bulge landscape, blurring the contours of quaint villages with pointy church spirals and red clay roofs so they almost looked intact after the intense bombing.

Unfrozen mud could swallow bodies and fill holes, but against the backdrop of snow that spanned the flat fields and streaked the Ardennes, nobody could completely disappear. The cold preserved the dead in seconds, the look of horror or peace seemed almost chiseled on their faces by the precise hands of ice. The bodies reminded Brillhart of sculptures he saw in the Paris Tuileries Gardens and he caught himself studying corpses as the snow dusted their bloodied clothes. Wounds frozen in time. The snow would never stop falling, blanketing the bodies, until spring turned the statues into fertilizer, humus for revitalizing the battle-ravaged soil.

Brillhart and his men shuffle-kicked and stomped their way through the Ardennes forest moonlit snow towards a Belgian farmhouse in the distance. Translucent smoke poured from its great stone chimney. The more the soldiers pounded the ground, the less likely that Brillhart, the battalion surgeon, would have to cut frostbite away from their feet, with amputation the eventual outcome. The thermometer registered thirteen below Celsius. They had to find a warm place for the night or freeze to death by morning.

I am sorry you cried at Christmas. I felt a little low myself. I can imagine the menu and it must have been wonderful. You should see me – I look like a coal miner, judging from the

slack in my pants. But don't worry. It won't take long to get my figure back once I start eating your cooking.

Snow! When I was a kid, I always loved the snow. It's nearly a foot thick in the fields here. There's less in the forests, which are beautiful but show battle scars. Belgium is a beautiful country. The Belgian people are simple and homegrown. They live quiet lives and never seem to be in a hurry. All along the way they gave us delicious apples. You want to fight to help these people. Already, they have been invaded twice by the Boches – we are here to prevent a third.

Over their thick wool uniforms and insulated helmets, Brillhart and the other Railsplitters were still wearing the long white winter underwear to camouflage themselves in the snow. During the past few days of the Bulge, wearing long underwear on the outside of their clothes became protocol. The disguise had helped them win the last yards of the town of Marche-en-Famenne, a three-day fight. The story told through the ranks was that, a few nights prior, the Railsplitters, wearing the outer layer of long, ghostly underwear, spotted two Germans cowering behind leafless trees in the winter forest lit by the full moon. Hunching over in the dark, the GIs first thought they were frightened bears. "Hände hoch!" one of the battalion sergeants had called, apparently mangling the German order with his strong Texan accent. The Krauts must have heard them coming but made no effort to run or fire. They raised their hands without protest as the Railsplitters surrounded them. Both Germans—now prisoners—had officer status. What were they doing alone in the woods in enemy territory? Rumors surmised that Krauts were tired and wanted to get caught by any ally before they had to confront the Russians again—American POW camps were said to be more humane. The two captured Germans had led the entire ghostly American battalion unnoticed away from five enemy squadrons and into the heart of a strategic Belgian village.

The rest of the Krauts didn't see the GIs coming at them from all sides and were forced to capitulate. Brillhart tried to get the American generals who implemented the rule to honor the insignificant private from his company who came up with the idea, but his superiors refused to admit that a boy who hadn't been to military school or even college was that smart.

White soldiers on white snow. A small town, big victory. A thousand men lost. The Bulge was far from over.

My birthday, Jan. 6, was spent in a town that I can't name – but I had French-fried potatoes (with salt!) and fried chicken (with salt!). I also heard a Kay Kiser radio program. What a treat! Kelly – the guy I told you about before – is still a Lieutenant. I found out why he wasn't promoted to Major: apparently, he hasn't got the guts, brains, foresight or desire. Personally, I have no respect for Kelly, but I play along to get what I want. Then there's the translator, Urban – we call him "Burpin Urban"–who asks to be evacuated every time he has some damned minor ailment. The whole regiment will rejoice if he gets really injured and leaves.

We get decent food from time to time, but what we really want is a bath, clean clothes, and a shave. I am glad to hear you are working on a scrapbook of our relationship. I wish I could send you something for it.

Brillhart and his men reached the farmhouse with the chimney. As he prepared to knock at the door, he realized that the orange light of the hearth would illuminate the blood and dirt stains on the white underwear covering their uniforms. They would look like murdered ghosts rather than American saviors. Brillhart instructed the men to shed the outer layer, then knocked. A toothless man with a hollow, dark-stained mouth answered. He uttered something Urban couldn't understand and slammed the door shut. Brillhart's stomach squeezed with hunger at the brief blast of heat and glimpse of the stove. He ordered the men to put their frozen C rations on the ground in

front of them as a peace offering.

A string of obscenities rose from the men. *Goddamn frog. Goddamn Belge.*

Goddammit, there was booze in there. Brillhart kicked at the door with his boot. Urban was a wiry nineteen-year-old with chronic indigestion and a Canadian mother. He tried to talk to the Belgian man when he re-opened the door, but the man shouted, waved his hands in the air, and slammed the door again. Brillhart kicked harder, shoving Urban in front of him. The Belgian opened again and gestured wildly. He held up all ten fingers, made fists, held up two more, and pointed to his crotch. Brillhart looked at Urban, his eyebrows raised. "What in the hell is he saying?"

Urban, useless, shook his head. "I can't understand this accent, Doc. I get one word out of ten."

The Belgian man held his hands to his chest in the shape of a woman's breasts. Still speaking quickly, he pointed to his crotch again and thrust towards the door as if he was taking a woman from behind. Then ten fingers, fists, and two more. More thrusting.

Oh! And I'm glad you like the perfume I bought you at Guerlain. Tell Aunt Bessie she'd better stay away from it, that cow!

The further along you get with the pregnancy, the more I wonder about whether you are taking care of yourself and if you are being careful. I wish I could have seen you at Christmas. We would have had so much fun together—shopping, packing, mailing presents.

Belgium at the present is wrecked with war. I don't know what kind of Christmas they had, but the people don't seem to mind. They realize that there must be some destruction in liberation.

"What's he saying, Doc, that he's a woman?" shouted Lt. Kelly, the short redhead Irishman from Chicago. "He wants to fuck us? What the hell? Tell him, sure! We'll make sweet love to him in exchange for a bed and some booze."

Brillhart turned around and drew his finger across his throat, looking at Kelly and the others. He shoved Urban forward to the door again. "Ask him to speak slowly. And ask it slowly."

"Nous comprenons rien, Monsieur. S'il vous plaît, nous comprenons rien. S'il vous plait, parlez plus lentement. We don't understand you, Sir. Don't speak so fast, please." Urban held up a can of C rations and a pack of cigarettes. He knocked the can against the house's stone wall to show that it was frozen. The man held up his palm and said slowly *"Attendez. Stop."* He pulled the door partly closed but left it open a crack. Brillhart moved closer to the sliver of heat coming from the house.

"Wait, he says wait," Urban said.

The Belgian man appeared at the door again, offering Brillhart a framed photograph. Twelve somber-eyed children dressed in white stood between a younger version of the man and a plump woman in black. Her lips were pressed so tightly that Brillhart wondered if they could soften into a kiss.

"He has twelve children sir," Urban said, *"Douze enfants, c'est ca, Monsieur? Pas de place, c'est ca?"* The man nodded vigorously and smiled, revealing several brown teeth lingering at the back of his mouth.

"Doc, we can't stay here. He's got twelve kids. No room. No food."

"Thank him and let's move out," Brillhart said. All twelve were probably sick and undernourished. He had dealt with enough depressing scenes over the last days and couldn't fathom caring for anyone else without a few hours of sleep.

Brillhart felt his men's disappointment and reminded them to keep rubbing their hands together to keep blood flowing.

"Son of a bitch."

"Merci, merci Monsieur. Au revoir. Bonne nuit," Brillhart said, mangling the few French words he learned.

"Et merci. Merci à vous, nos sauveurs. Que Dieu soit avec vous jusqu'à la fin," said the man, bowing his head and then saluting.

The door closed. The emptiness of moonlight in the snow silenced them. Their hunger deepened, but they left the C-rations for the family in front of the house. *When you talk about buying diapers for Junior, I wonder about the name we should choose for him when he's born. I'm at a loss. I have considered every single name in and out of the family, and even some girl names just in case. Belgian names like Colette, Therèse, Jeanne, but I still can't hit it. I think about cigarettes, too. I've got more than a carton left, but I give so many to civilians. They need them more than I do.*

Still stomping and kicking at the snow, Brillhart felt the heat at the bottom of his veins dwindling. His blood was slowing. Little knives of cold dug in. He was minutes from frostbite. Nothing could stop the necrology of frozen tissue.

When the Railsplitters first arrived in the region, he found the rolling mountains of the Ardennes comforting. They brought back pleasant memories of snow-covered hills in Kentucky after football practice when he would walk home to the wood stove and hot food. As the star of the team, he ran miles, back and forth on the practice field, crushing himself against other players and smelling dirt as he hit the ground. After practice, he stayed in the hot shower longer than the others, feeling the gentle pull of his muscles recover. He knew that he wanted to spend his whole life studying the body's power. Back then, all he knew of war were the medals his grandfather

won in 1917 from the Meuse-Argonne. His grandfather was strong and quiet although he cried at odd times.

While poor, he was a nobleman in the coal mining town. Everyone respected him. Before the Bulge, it had never crossed Brillhart's mind that his grandfather saw things like uncoiling intestines.

But within days of the Battle, the Ardennes appeared squat and bulbous under a gray sky that faded or darkened according to the amount of smoke rising from arms fire and shelling. Only at night could Brillhart see a few stars. Now, in leading his freezing men in search of another house, Brillhart decided he wanted to live in an isolated, beautiful place like pre-war Belgium, alone with June and Jr., away from everyone, away from the cities and people. He would build a beautiful Belgian stone house from the rubble.

Since you always ask, I'll tell you about the old farmhouse in Belgium we stayed in. It was typical of Belgian farmhouses in that the barn and house were located together, but the Belgians are very clean people. It was clear that Jerry had used the house as an aid station a few short hours before we arrived. Fresh piles of dirt indicated that a few dead Jerries were buried outside.

The men almost passed by the next farmhouse. There were no lights, and no smoke rose from the chimney, but it was quiet. Brillhart switched on his flashlight and shone it across the stone walls. Bullet marks dotted the façade, but no other sign of significant structural destruction was visible. He knocked on the door, prepared to wait, but the it swung open. The men stepped inside and swept their flashlights across the rooms.



A Belgian farmhouse during WWII, perhaps the one mentioned in these letters, or another. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.

As their eyes grew accustomed to the dimness, they saw soiled gauze, empty morphine ampoules, discarded scalpels, and shards of disinfectant tubes littering the floor. Sofas, chairs, and a piano with missing keys had been pushed towards the wall and the large kitchen table had been dragged into the center of the living room. The top of the table was slick with frozen blood and icy bits of flesh.

“All clear Doc,” called Kelly from the kitchen. “Not even any dead ones lying around. Think they’re all outside already, buried and frozen, so they won’t stink us out. God, I love German efficiency.”

Though it was a hygienic disaster, the house would do for the night. Brillhart and his men decided to light a fire in the stove, eat, sleep a little.

The soldiers found enough logs stacked in the small barn adjoining the house to make fires in the kitchen stove and in the living room fireplace. Slowly, their hands and C rations thawed. A few portraits hung on the wall, but the subdued eyes and high-buttoned collars inspired little empathy from the hungry men, who were more concerned about the unpleasant taste of canned rations. The flames revealed details of their physical condition— all the fat chiseled from their cheeks, chins peppered with dirt and stubble, eyes like dull moons. They looked to Brillhart like the coal miners limping into a diner in Loyall, Kentucky after days underground. Brillhart remembered thinking that no amount of sunlight could erase the miners' ashen pallor as they drank coffee and ate toast with pork gravy. The color was stain, not dust.

Every meal for Brillhart and the medics had become a guessing game since the labelling disintegrated in the wet snow. Tonight, they opened three cans of meat and potato hash, two meat stew, four meat and beans, and five cellophane-wrapped fudge bars. They added two instant coffees and nine pressed sugar cubes. Except for the chocolate and sugar, all had the same soft, morbid taste of over-salted metal. They had eaten the same range of things for almost two months. It calmed but never vanquished their hunger.

Kelly stubbed his cigarette out in the viscous film of meat hash left in one of the cans. "Well, that was disgusting, as usual. Anyone want to go with me to find the cellar? They've always got something stored away in those basements. Maybe even booze."

Urban followed him. Brillhart stayed upstairs and smoked one of his last cigarettes.

Kelly's trip to the basement reminded Brillhart of Christmas when he and some other Railsplitters had spent the holiday with a Belgian family in the town of Comblain La Tour. During the meal, Monsieur Colson, the father, recounted the town's

proud history. It was famous for its picturesque houses along the quais of the river Ourthe, and for its steep granite cliffs, called Le Rocher de la Vierge. After dinner, when Brillhart thought he had eaten and drunk everything the family had to offer, Monsieur Colson stood up and announced he was going to the cellar for the rest. He disappeared and then re-emerged with one arm full of dried sausages. In the other, he carried a bucket sloshing over with a thick dark red liquid. *"C'est du boudin. C'est du sang. Pour le nouvel an."* He set it in the middle of the kitchen, rolled up his sleeves, and pulled out strings of sausage links. "Blood sausage. For New Year's.

As he stared into the bucket of blood, Brillhart his eyes swirled. In the messy pail, he saw intestines spilling out of downed men. Blond curls belonging to a private he lost back at the battle at Geilenkirchen in December swirled together with the intestines. His vision blackened and he fainted, falling off of his chair to the floor. He came to as Kelly pinched his cheeks and announced to everyone that Brillhart had never been able to hold his liquor. He hoped that Kelly would come back from the basement in this deserted house with something more appetizing than blood sausage.

In the basement of the house, we found two girls— one around 18 and the other 8 – and a smaller brother who was blind and badly crippled. Jerry had locked them down there. They hadn't eaten for four days, it was very cold, and upstairs, the parents had been shot dead. The mother and father were still in bed under the covers. We brought the kids upstairs and gave them food and hot coffee and blankets.

"Doc, you'd better get down here," Kelly called from the top of the basement stairwell, breathless. Urban panted behind him.

The soldiers' flashlights made a flickering kaleidoscope of yellow dots as they thundered down the stairs, then formed a

bright circle around three children, two girls and a boy, propped against the far end of the basement wall. Pale and shivering, tears traced lines down their fear-pinched faces, but they didn't move. The younger girl whimpered as the men moved closer.

Brillhart pointed to the red cross on his sleeve and then to the sleeves of all the other medics as he approached. He motioned to Urban, who said, "We're doctors. We're here to help you. Don't worry" and then, "*Nous sommes médecins. Nous sommes là pour vous aider. Ne vous inquiétez pas.*" Despite their tears and dirty faces, he noticed the two girls were beautiful, with heart-shaped faces and thick wavy brown hair. They huddled around the boy. Brillhart elbowed Urban in the back when he fell silent. "Keep talking, Goddammit. They need to know they can trust us."

Urban jumped and repeated "We're Americans. We're allies," several times.

Finally, the girls unlocked themselves from around the boy and the young girl looked at the men with a faint smile. *Nous sommes Américains.*

The eldest girl began to get to her feet as if to move toward them, then fainted, her hand sliding down the wall as she hit the floor. The other two children bent over her, screaming, *Germaine, Germaine!*

"Sh, shhhh. It's ok." Kelly moved forward and gently slid his arms under Germaine, while Brillhart took her feet. Despite the fullness of her face and lips, her body was almost emaciated. She seemed to weigh almost nothing. Together, they made their way up the stairs. Urban stayed with her as she recovered in the kitchen while Brillhart and Kelly went to get the other sister and the boy, who could barely walk.

Brillhart put more C rations on the fire and melted clean snow for drinking water. The children brought the food and water to

their mouths in swift, jerky movements, and it was gone in minutes. The men searched their bags for more cans. Brillhart saw a bit of color return to the childrens' faces and realized they were more beautiful than he thought. With a bit of regained strength, the girls looked tearfully around their devastated house.

Brillhart felt grateful when he learned the boy was blind. At least he couldn't see the blood and dirt covering his family home, or how the lace curtains had been torn from the windows, probably used for tourniquets.

The younger girl, Colette, sprang up from the table and ran toward the stairs leading to the second floor.

"Non!" Germaine cried. She lunged forward but teetered and gripped the table for balance. "Please, stop her. She's looking for my parents are up there. She can't see that."

Brillhart caught Colette and lifted her up as she kicked her legs in protest. He set her by Germaine, who enveloped her sister with her arms. Colette shuddered and buried her head in Germaine's shoulder.

"Maman, Papa," she sobbed.

Germaine, who had begun to cry again, dug her lips into Colette's hair and muttered quick, soft French until she calmed. Brillhart dug in the rations and pulled out all of the pressed sugar cubes that the men used to make the terrible coffee somewhat drinkable.

"Look," he said, holding a cube up to Colette's face. "It's magic." He stuck out his tongue and placed one of the white squares. He pulled his tongue back in, scrunched his face for a few seconds, and stuck it back out. The square had transformed into a smaller, rounded lump. He stuck his tongue back in again and repeated the process two more times. Finally, the sugar cube disappeared and his clownishness had

drawn a weak giggle from Colette. He offered the box to the girls, who mimicked him. He gave one to the blind brother, Jacques. He had steadied them enough for now. He would give them the chocolate at the next outburst if necessary.

While Jacques and Colette sucked and played with the pressed sugar cubes, the older girl, Germaine, who spoke excellent English, stood in a corner out of earshot of her siblings and quietly told Brillhart the story of the last few days. The Jerries had arrived in the middle of the night, kicking open the front door, waking the whole family, but it was too late for them to hide. The children ran to the room where the parents slept, and they hugged each other in fright as the soldiers climbed the stairs. The soldiers kicked the bedroom door open, ordered the children out, and shot the parents. They made the children take them to the cellar. The Jerries were tired of their own rations too. When they found nothing, they locked the children inside. That was four days ago.

According to Germaine, the cellar had done little to muffle the sounds of battle that raged around them and of the makeshift hospital the Germans had made in their home. Shelling shook the house for hours at a time and the children were sure they would be buried alive when the walls caved in. The screams they heard came in waves, followed by silence. "Either they died, or the morphine kicked in," Brillhart explained. Germaine had heard someone calling for his mother.

The scene was a tear jerker. Unfortunately, I've seen things like it several times.

What can you do? Curse Jerry and carry on. When we left, we notified civilian affairs and made sure the children had some food. And then we looked to our next job.

Brillhart made a bed out of the Army blankets next to the dwindling fire in the stove for the children, who had barely slept while locked in the cellar. Germaine sung to Jacques and

Colette until they closed their eyes.

"It's a miracle," Germaine said. "I can't believe they're sleeping. Thank you."

"You should sleep too. We're not going anywhere right now. It's safe." Brillhart handed her the blanket he was going to use for his own bed. She wrapped it around her shoulders. Colette whimpered in her sleep. Germaine placed her hand on her sister's head to soothe her and then closed her own eyes.

Once the children were all asleep, curled in their blankets next to the stove, Brillhart went upstairs, harboring the stupid hope that the mother and father had somehow suffered only surface wounds, and were still alive. When he found them, he understood why Kelly overlooked the scene. He was surprised to find the parents' room neat, untouched, except for minimal bloodstains on the floor and the pungent odor of decomposition that they had all gotten used to. Under a pristine white blanket two figures, a set of shadowy lumps dappled with moonlight appeared to sleep.

Once, when his father had rare a day off from the railroad and slept the whole night at home, Brillhart woke before sunrise and tiptoed to watch his parents sleeping. They snored in soft, cacophonous bursts. His mother's snore was deep and throaty, while his father exhaled shrill, nasal blasts. He watched them hopefully, willing his father to get up and go outside to the pond with him to catch the early-biting fish.

That morning, his mother awoke to her young son standing in the doorway of her bedroom. Instead of shooing him away, she lifted the covers, and Brillhart crawled over her into the warm space between his parents. He pressed his back into his mother and let the snoring lull him back to sleep.

When he pulled back the blankets on the bed in the Belgian farmhouse in Marche-en-Famenne, Brillhart was relieved. The gunshot wounds on their heads were dried. The blood had

drained from the backs of their heads into the pillows and mattress. The Germans had made a perfect, thorough shot. Madame and Monsieur Jacques Bourguignon. A mother, a father asleep with the knowledge, Brillhart hoped, that their children had been spared.

It had only taken a few months of combat for Brillhart to understand what he now called German logic. Unlike the French, the Germans were exacting, methodical. When he checked German medical bags left on the field, he found them to be impeccable, well-stocked, with clean instruments. The tanks, the weapons, the burp guns fired precisely. The Germans spared no one, not even animals got in the way of the mission or the order.

Few traces of life sprouted back after their destructive path. The rumor was, though, that they were also tired. Americans were fresh from two decades of peace. It was their main advantage.

Brillhart couldn't understand why the Jerries had let the children live. This bedroom looked like someone had tucked the parents in. If the parents were trying to protect the children or vice versa, some kind of struggle must have ensued. Sheets on the floor, nightstands knocked over blood and brains everywhere. Someone had taken care to clean up, to recreate a peaceful diorama. Given his take on German behavior, the scene both dumbfounded him and made perfect sense. He placed the covers back over the couple's head, went downstairs, and ordered Kelly and Urban to take the bodies to the barn outside before the children woke up.

I read your letters over and over to make them last longer. It is darned nice of you to write so often. Mother never writes, but I guess she is busy with her sister and can't find time. I should be in bed right now, but I wanted to write to the dearest person in my world.

A few hours later, in the kitchen, they were awake, hovering over the stove to keep warm. Jacques plunked away on a piano with a few keys missing. Colette was the only one still sleeping. Brillhart and his men talked intermittently with Germaine.

In 1914, the girls' father had stopped trusting Germans after losing his entire family to the first World War. As soon as Hitler annexed Austria, the father dug a hole in the basement floor, barred it with a wooden plank, and covered it with dirt. Day after day, he filled it with his hunting rifles, ammunition resistance, yards of dried sausage, pork fat, dried potatoes, jars of apples, bottles of beer, and candles. He was determined to see his family survive the second coming of the Germans. That's why, at first, the children weren't worried when the Germans locked them in the cellar. But when they tried to get to the supplies, they found that the ground was hard and frozen. They didn't have the strength to dig all the way through.

"Why didn't you tell us when we were serving you that horrible army crap?" Kelly cried.

Germaine shrugged her shoulders and blushed. "It wasn't that bad."

In minutes, the GIs were chopping away with axes they found in the barn. Within two hours, pork fat and potatoes sizzled in a heavy pan. Apples bubbled beside them. The soldiers drank the thawed beer and gnawed on the sausages, giddy that they outsmarted the Germans with this treasure trove of food. Thanks to their father, these children would survive on the surplus through the rest of the war. Colette started to cry again and run to the stairs, but Brillhart brought her back and gave her chocolate, which she had never tasted. The novelty quieted her briefly.

For the second time, Brillhart entertained the idea that June,

his wife, might give birth to a girl. If so, he would name her Germaine. Jacques felt his way to the piano and played a song resembling Yankee Doodle Dandee on the remaining keys. Blind and crippled, he seemed the least affected by the parents' death or perhaps he was just used to other people taking care of him so he trusted the soldiers. Brillhart, Kelly, and Urban laughed as the boy sputtered the words to the song. How did he know? they asked. "Papa taught it to him and told him to play it as soon as the Americans got here," Germaine explained.

"Well, shit," Ramsey, a medic from Georgia said, "Your Pops had his damn head too far up north. Shove over boy, let me play you the real song." Ramsey sat next to the boy and pounded out Dixie. Even with the missing keys, Ramsey managed to render an accurate version. After hearing it that one time, Jacques replayed it perfectly.

"He's a goddamn Mozart," Ramsey said.

His sisters smiled shyly "He can do it with almost any song," Germaine said.

The GIs all sang the southern hymn of Dixie together and then returned to the food.

After more apples, potatoes, sausage, beer, and coffee, Brillhart sat down and talked to Germaine again. Germaine told them how Monsieur Bourguignon had put away money for at least one of his children to go away and study something other than farming. Since his only boy was blind and crippled, he decided Germaine would be the best educated of his two girls. The schools nearby didn't have a spot for her, so instead, she spent six months in Amsterdam studying to become an English teacher, which explained why she hardly needed any translating from Urban. She had a second cousin in Amsterdam, who lodged her in exchange for housecleaning and goods from the farm in Marche-en-Famenne that Monsieur Bourguignon brought once a month.

The mention of the Netherlands made Brillhart remember the package nestled under his coat. He had been carrying a slightly-torn Dutch comic book that he found in another house weeks ago. He understood none of the words – he just knew it wasn't German – but the pictures of the animal characters made him smile. He ruffled Colette's hair and pulled it from his leather satchel, spreading the pages out on the newly-clean kitchen table. Colette seemed transfixed by the critters jumping over the pages and giggled when Brillhart snorted like one of the pig characters. When she pointed to a horse, he neighed and stuck his upper teeth out. She giggled again. Germaine leaned over the table, too, smiling at the comics and at her little sister.

Brillhart announced that he would return in a few minutes. Germaine nodded and waved. He heard Jacques still pattering away at Dixie on the piano. He couldn't see the children's faces when he said goodbye. Perhaps the first overwhelming stirrings of fatherhood. Germaine, Colette, and the boy almost felt like his children, as if he owned them, as if they owned him. If he could wrap them up and send them to June, he would. They would love America. He envisioned a bustling household full of the adopted French-speaking children and his own. Germaine could be the nanny and go to school. He pictured the crippled boy sitting in the sun by the pool he hoped to build one day. Water exercises would be good for atrophied legs. If he stayed with them any longer, he might stay forever. Brillhart kept walking.

When he reached the main road, he saw the line of surrendered German soldiers, many carrying litters of wounded. They filed past Brillhart as he went to the battalion station in the center of town. Kelly would have yelled obscenities at the prisoners, but Brillhart kept his head down.

That afternoon, the Railsplitters moved on to another town, another battle. A few days later, they came back through Marche-en-Famenne. Brillhart had let civil affairs know about

Germaine, the two younger children, and the dead parents. Brillhart walked into the center of Marche-en-Famenne taking photos for June, though few of the buildings rising out of the icy rubble remained intact. The Town Hall with its Romanesque and Gothic facades, the Mosan church and belfry, made of red brick with ornate white trimmings, and the classical columns of what had been a bank, represented Old Europe. This was what June would want to see. This was where she dreamed that Brillhart ate and slept each night. He tried to aim the camera so that it didn't capture the hungry townspeople or piles of broken homes. Sometimes, without taking pictures, he let the camera linger in front of his face to hide his eyes that searched everywhere for Germaine and the children.

He paused in front of a modest, partially-caved-in church and observed a small cemetery with a group of civilians gathered by tombstones that had been knocked sideways by shelling. A priest crossed his hands over the bodies of the dead before closing their makeshift caskets. Brillhart recognized, among them, Germaine's mother and father. Next to them was a hole that Brillhart knew had taken hours to dig in the hard ground. He looked into the crowd for the children but still didn't see them. He hoped they were drinking Red Cross hot chocolate and eating doughnuts under warm blankets.

Today, I saw townspeople burying bodies in a churchyard. Amid the rubble and ruin, a small group surrounded a priest who was quietly conducting the ceremony. Some of our boys helped to dig the graves. The parents from the farmhouse were among the bodies.

There is so much ruin. It's hard to imagine the Belgian people regaining the quiet lives they once had. And at the same time, it's easy to see how this destruction feeds all our hatred of the Germans. It makes us want to kill more, and take fewer prisoners, to grind every German deep into the soil. Sometimes I am afraid of how you will react when I return. I hope and pray that you'll still know me, but that the memory of this

ruin will stay vivid enough that we will never let the German or any belligerent nation get a foothold again.

We thoroughly enjoyed the cookies and the Readers Digests you sent, as well as the tuna fish, knackers, sardines, and saltines. Thank you. My darling, I must stop now. I have a big day ahead of me. I will try to write more often, but regardless of how busy I am, I'm never too busy to remember you and the things we've done together, to think about our plans for the future. I love you more every day. Brillhart.



Brillhart's wife upon the birth of their first child, a girl, in April of 1945. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Orth-Veillon.